

Sabrina, Sabrina

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Published By:
Zem Books
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Prolog

Tanner Benjamin rolled around in bed and stared at the ceiling. Outside, a lightening storm seemed to have been imported from some classic *Universal* monster film. All that was missing was the manic presence of a Colin Clive, or the sepulchral, withered features of Ernest Thesiger. It was perfect nightmare weather, and that was what Tanner had been having.

His dream, however, had been more than a dream; it had been a revelation.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how to put it all together, or what it really meant. But it was so damned eerie, he found sleep at this point to be impossible.

It was as if he was connected to some vast, computerized intelligence. He could see the world (or at least his small portion of it) like it was a form of diagram, or schematic. He realized, then, in the small hours of the morning, that all of life is interconnected in a strange way that is nearly, without the aid at least of some system of consciousness-expansion, impossible for the typical workaday mind to conceive.

He closed his eyes. He was gone again, unexpectedly.

At precisely that moment, and that moment was either damned late or damned early depending on your perspective, two young men who had sold their souls away for bitter herbs and sickened bellies looked at their collection of pornographic DVD movies. They found it to be completely dissatisfying, and one of them remarked, “I wonder what it would be like to rape someone?”

The other man, a tall, lanky man who was popular with young women, looked at him and said, “why don’t you try it and find out?”

The two young men laughed, although the remark had not been funny.

Across town, Kevin Hickman was sitting in a bar by himself, wondering what had happened to his life.

He hefted the glass to his lips. He swilled down the dark, foul-tasting beer. It no longer held any sensation for him to drink. He had become numb, inside and out. It was honest addiction that kept him going.

“Hey man, you wanna come up to my place and smoke a joint?”

The man sitting next to him was very drunk. He was a mental patient of Hickman’s acquaintance. A guy they called “Electric Jake” because of his brief, supposed, history of electroconvulsive therapy. The bar was nearly silent. Only a few tired souls dotted the respective benches of the great long wooden tables.

“Sure. Hell yeah. Let’s do it.”

Kevin finished his beer with one gulp, slid off the stool, and followed the smaller, swaying man outside.

Outside, the decrepit storefronts that had seen so many businesses come and go over the years looked black and inviolate. It looked like they were keeping the secrets of the city at bay.

Hickman followed the little man around the dark corner, down a block, past a waiting police officer, and then both men disappeared into a hole in the wall that led up a precarious, foul-smelling flight of stairs into a cubby with a bed and a toilet. Home.

Several blocks away and closer to the bridge, in a little house that had seen far-better days, Jill Lavender sat cross-legged on her couch, smoking a cigarette in the darkness of the night.

Bruce had not bothered to come home. Bruce was staying out with his buddies more and more these days. He always told her she wasn’t his “mother”. But damnit, she was his lover, and it bothered her. And something else bothered her, too.

Something she had heard from a friend of hers.

Little Lindsey was upstairs, no doubt snuggled away in the bosom of sleep. She loved the kid. She also felt damn guilty, too. Lindsey deserved a decent man to be her father. Unfortunately, Jill Lavender had had a habit of picking out shit heels to be her lovers, boyfriends, husbands. The habit had started in high school, with Lindsey's biological father.

She looked at the ridiculous TV programming. It was all infomercials at this hour. A very tanned, very aerobic-looking senior man was busy juicing different varieties of fruits and vegetable matter. She flipped the channel. Now, a highly-spastic individual wearing a purple Joker suit covered in question marks was telling her about the wonders of government grants. She wanted to bawl.

She puffed at her long, skinny cigarette. The smoke curled into little clouds of noxious vapor in the cathode ray glare of the television. Maybe she should put in a video. *Steel Magnolias*, or something.

"Damn him," she said to herself bitterly. "I'm still fairly young. I'm still good looking. Why does he want anybody else?"

Tanner Benjamin rolled and kicked furiously in his sleep. He could see it again, plainly. It was all interconnected. It was all a vast connection of different invisible life streams and time loops. His brain told him he was standing in the kitchen at Delcinos.

"You better hurry your ass up man. It's getting backed-up out there."

Tanner moved at speeds human beings could barely comprehend. He filled endless racks with dirty dishes, slamming the mouth of the washer closed. The audible whoosh of the sprayer sounded like a hurricane drone in the theatre of his sleeping mind.

He was alone in the kitchen. Where was everyone?

He could see the waitress come in. He couldn't see her face.

She didn't seem to have a face.

She walked away on incredibly grotesque, backward-facing legs. It looked as if she had traded legs with an obscure, featherless breed of giant bird. He wanted to vomit. He could feel slime in his soul.

Suddenly, he heard the barking report of what sounded like a cannon. He rushed from the dish room, flinging open the door, and ran out into the maelstrom of the darkened bar.

All that he could remember after that was blood. Terror. Screaming.

And a body, floating like some elegant flower cast off into the ocean. How it crumpled. It was a female body, so beautiful it made him want to weep.

He bolted upright in bed, sweat beading his form. Outside, a crack of thunder and a flash of lightening illuminated the dull little room he called home. He got up from bed slowly, quietly, and slipped on his jeans.

The two young men who had sold their spirits stood outside in the sprawling backyard owned by the oldest man's father. They watched the lightening play its magic upon the sky, and the trees swish, and dance, and shake in the wind. They could feel their own hideousness in the midst of this grand display.

"Kyle?"

"What?"

"We are going to hell, aren't we?"

He considered. The lightening threw a jagged spear across the heavens.

"Yes."

"Do you care? I mean, that we're damned?"

Pause.

"No."

"Good. Because if you don't care, well, then, that makes it easier for me. Because I know we have to do this now, man. I can

feel it out here tonight. Can you? I can feel the *presence*.”

It seemed, for a moment, like the two men could see an infernal, black shape move in the trees and bushes. They fancied it might be the Devil himself. At that same moment, Lindsey Lavender put her little face on her arm and began weeping in her sleep.

Secluded in a tiny foul-smelling cubby that hadn't been cleaned within recent memory, Kevin Hickman and “electric” Jake passed a very thick, very powerful joint between each other. Hickman had been drinking all night. He looked as if he smelled as bad as he felt.

The lightening and wind conspired to cast the old building they sat in to it's heels. Kevin looked over his shoulder, out the ancient window pane, and said, his voice the sound of dragging tires, “I hope your apartment makes it through the storm, man.”

Electric Jake had slumped into a ratty armchair that looked as if it had been pulled from the dumpster of the local Salvation Army, and could barely keep his eyes open.

He mumbled something barely intelligible.

“No. Didn't you hear me? I said, the storm might tear this apartment down. Man, I think I better be heading.”

Kevin Hickman made sure to bogue the roach. Old Jake was too far gone already to even notice. Hell with him.

Kevin managed to find himself back out on the street. He walked warily down the sidewalk. His place was an ancient house of monumental ugliness and disrepair. But it was, at least, a roof.

Darkness. Darkness. All around him darkness and loneliness. Walking back to your room before the dawn, when the world slept through it's nightmares, and being alone, was one of the hardest things he had had to get use to.

It looked surreal. The faded bricks. The old storefront windows. Many men had walked here before for over a century back.

Did any of their ghosts still beat these pavement with tired shoes? He crossed over by the flower boutique, past an old bank building, heading into his own neighborhood. He was able to pick out the frame of the vast edifice through his bleary, dope-addled eyes. He managed his way into the side door.

He didn't notice, but one of the cars that passed him as he walked carried a very beautiful female form. He would meet this same woman in two nights, and though he would never in his life actually get to know her, his meeting with her would be an integral part of the story that was told later, and sold on checkout lines in cheap rags across the USA. Even the name of Kevin Hickman would have a sort of fifteen minute brush with celebrity.

But he didn't know that then, as he walked into the darkened kitchen, past the pool table, into the large foyer that had once belonged to a single family.

He walked up the stairs, slowly. There was a doorway on the second landing that led to a side section that was all small rooms that could have accommodated college classes. The building had been added on to, changed around, demolished, and brought back up again in such a haphazard fashion that the architectural layout was nearly occult.

On the uppermost floor there was an abandoned, vintage diner that dated from right after WW2. Even Kevin Hickman sometimes got the shivers in this house. Age is not our friend, he reflected.

Professor Milt Seebaum shoveled in a cold turkey TV dinner.

He always bought around ten of them every pay day. He went through them damn quick. Ah, the bitter hours of morning restlessness. Lucky he didn't have classes to teach today. Lucky for him, because he was damn irascible on no sleep.

He wanted another one, thought better of it, and set the plastic tray on his nightstand. Who cared if he was a slob? Not

like he ever had many visitors. Goodnight, Mr. Chips.

The lightening and thunder were grand, really, He could see out the filmy curtain how intense, how alive nature was. And it always struck him as somewhat sad that his own nature was so restricted. So formal. So repressed.

Then he closed his eyes. He remembered who he was. He was Dr. Milton H. Seebaum. He was a cultured man, a man who had spent his entire life in pursuit of learning. And teaching.

Romance, he surmised, was not for everyone.

He drifted into sleep. His dreams were all permutations of the same theme. He was holding back an army of drooling, pathetic ogres with a single torch of illumination. That torch was all that meant anything to him. But he was lost in a wilderness, alone. And the wind was blowing, and the fire was beginning to dim.

Tanner stood in front of the rooming house with a cigarette clasped in his shaking fingers. He was half-terrified of the storm, but found it exhilarating in equal measure. His half-awake mind was still focusing on the images of his strange dream.

The darkened panic.

Gunshots.

The falling woman.

(Later, Tanner would go back upstairs and sleep. His dreams would become even more troubled, dreams chiefly concerned with decay, with deformity, with themes of distress and repressed anger.)

Around him, the world slept, awoke, shuddered, breathed, sobered, suffered and waited. And this was only one morning, just before dawn.

Part One

One

It was the pounding down force of the music that seemed to rock them all to a sort of religious ecstasy. Wasn't it, after all, the tribal drumbeats of certain native African witch doctors that were supposed to call forth the spirits from beyond? He wasn't sure; he could hardly see now why it even mattered.

There were an assortment of skinny young girls here; all clad in the same regulation black, scuffed jeans, worn gray at the seams by the endless moving of the material up shapely, skinny young hips. It was a real gasser to look at.

Tanner was so drunk he could barely stand up. He kept walking around the room, minutes passing by in the firmament of time, making the late evening into the early morning. He passed some drunken man who was busily rubbing the crotch of a hopeful amour. In the kitchen, the guitar player was having a heartfelt conversation about beating up some of his classmates at a young age. Tanner sincerely hoped he didn't, tonight, decide to demonstrate his technique upon the weaker ones assembled.

The air was heavy with the smoke of cannabis, marijuana, dank...call it what you will. He took a regulation puff. He needed to make these people feel calm.

It was a communal thing amongst grass smokers to pass a little...but don't bogue the joint, and for gods sake don't fink on anybody's weed. It was beyond the pale of what could be considered proper etiquette to do such a thing.

Tanner was what a generous person might call "socially inept". It is never a good idea for the socially inept to be intoxicated in a room full of testy egos all vying for the attention of young ladies of loose virtue. It is never a good idea...but Tanner rarely had good ideas.

More often than not, he had trouble. When he had tagged along to this affair, he was, it assumed, still sober enough to maintain his social composure in front of the assembled. He had *assumed* that, at least. Unfortunately, it was failing to be true.

Already, he had bumped the swelling breast of the bustiest

maiden at the party. It had been completely unintentional, but I was the fact that, while it was happening, he had been too astounded to even move. Hell, he was sure he didn't even *vibrate* for a moment.

The tit in question had been kept snugly in a rayon boustiere affair that must have dated from at least 1970, but his bare hand (or the back of it at least) had swept down the curving slope of that unseen breast, to the pugnacious erection of the nipple in question. The breast that that nipple was attached to belonged to a body that was little, well-proportioned, and gabbing drunkenly with a great, imbecilic oaf of a man that must have been the boyfriend. Tanner, before he even knew it, was being verbally assaulted by a series of harsh, barking voices calling him a plethora of nasty, suggestive names.

"You fucking asshole, why dontcha---"

Her gapey little face suddenly shot into a million particulates of infinitesimal disgust. Her bonehead boyfriend leaned over, and slurred, "Hey dickface, do you want to meet me outside?"

Tanner turned drunkenly, and suddenly a group of several anonymous strangers seemed to stumble between them, cutting Tanner off from almost certain death. But it would not last.

A young guy in a tie came ambling into the room. He had blood all over the front of his shirt. Suddenly, Tanner Benjamin felt an icy jab in his ribs. A great explosion of pain sent sparkles flying across his field of vision. He had been sucker-punched, and had been too drunk to see it coming. He fell backward into a loping retreat, past drunken sweaty faces, past bony female faces advertng displeasure at the young body hurling itself through space and across the living room floor to the battered screen door that promised a mode of escape from Big Authoritative Jock Boyfriend.

Outside, some wilted teenage co-ed was busy throwing up dorm food onto the otherwise nice white driveway. Fresh air hit him like a soothing balm, and he took one deep, shuddering

breath to still himself. You could probably hear the music inside several blocks away.

He walked, or rather, stumbled off the porch, past the assembled friends of the puking girl, and ambled out into the darkness of the yard. Suddenly, behind him loomed the Darth Vader visage of his assailant; a massive, quarterback-style silhouette that was making it's confused way outside to finish the job it had begun. Tanner realized he would have to hustle away from this ogre quickly, lest the scent of blood arouse the rest of the pack.

He began to try and disappear down the sidewalk, weaving in and out between people coming from, and going to, the party. The ogre simply stood on the porch, following him in the darkness with drunken eyes, and holding out one meaty fist, saying:

“Yeah, that's right little boy, you better run. Know you'll get your ass kicked. Messing with my girl...”

He shouted in short, declarative bursts of bully lingo, but at least, Tanner sighed, he was going to let Tanner go. Then, the icing on the cake. The one event of the evening that, somehow, made everything, seem a little bit better.

The fast approach of the lighted squad car. The party was over, for all of those who hadn't been sucker-punched, at least.

Tanner awoke the next day with his head feeling as big as a basketball, and a growing, steady depression related to the fact that, in just a few hours, he would have to go to work.

It was never good going to work with a hangover. No matter how hard you tried, no matter how much Tylenol you took, no matter how concentrated nice you tried to be, for some reason, everybody still *knew*. They could smell it linger on you, like a dog pissing on a tree. Alcohol marked it's territory. It was eerie.

Worse yet, the world around him and outside his window seemed as gray, as joyless as the onset of old age. He moved tired bones. He promised he would never do it again.

He lied.

He knew damn well he would.

He ambled out of bed and went to the wash basin. In the basin, he looked at his haggard face in the cracked bathroom mirror. Hooray for living.

Hooray for fucking life. As he saw it, it had fucked him in the ass before he even knew it had its blood up. He had been born to be the Quasimodo of the social set: a pariah, a dork, a nerd, a “young insignificant or inexperienced person”.

In other words: a four-eyed punk. A runty troll. A guy that would never make the chess team, let alone the football team.

He applied a huge swell of lather to his chops, and commenced shaving. It was going to make it more endurable, he decided, to be cleaned up. To be free of the sweat and funk of first the bar and then the horrible party he had wandered into.

He smiled.

The party had gotten busted just as he was forced to leave. He could still see Darth Vader standing on the porch, his over-developed arm extended in a threatening finger-pointing gesture that must have really turned his girlfriend on.

“ Cocksucker...fucking jock. Jocks think they own everything, just because they have muscles on their muscles. Fucking cock.”

Tanner was so enraged for a moment he wanted to crush his own image in the mirror. Then he decided that this was probably bad luck. More bad luck he didn't need.

He started to scritch scratch the blade across his face. It felt good to be getting the stuff off his ample cheeks; nobody liked a pudgy dwarf, but they didn't like them even more if they had beard scruff. So.

He didn't cut himself. The way his head was swimming it felt like he was destined to cut himself.

Scritch scratch. Scritch scratch. Scritch scratch.

Whoosh.

He rinsed the blade off, looked at the tiny molecules of

growth floating in the dank water. He looked in the mirror at his eyes.

Mhm. Totally bloodshot. Totally alien. Those eyes held a lot of impotent rage this morning. Those eyes had not been loved since those eyes could remember. Those eyes looked out upon the world that most people thought of as beautiful, and J. Tanner Benjamin thought looked like a pile of fresh dogshit.

He walked out of the bathroom, and looked at the phone. How much did he have in savings? Couple hundred? Enough to pay another month's rent? He had always been a conscientious saver.

Call-off. Call-off. Better yet, just call those bastards up and say, "fuck you I'm outta here!"

Boy that would be rich. Boy, that would be a lot of fun.

Did he have the nerve?

He approached the phone slowly. His rumpled, cool covers looked as inviting, as enticing as anything he had ever seen before in his life. He wanted to desperately crawl in between them, pull them up over his head, and forget about the maddening pace and confusion of the world. If he went into work it was going to be busting his ass until one o'clock in the morning, washing dishes for a bunch of jock animals that he hated anyway...a bunch of drunk frat guys and their slutty, cyber-babe girlfriends. It was damn loud in that sports bar, what with Karaoke and shouted conversations, and even back in the kitchen it was so loud, sometimes, you felt like you had just stuck your head inside a wind tunnel and hit a button labeled "hurricane". Could he take it? Could he deal with it feeling like he did?

Call off. Call off. Call off.

It was a quarter to two. If he dialed them with some lame-as excuse now, they would (a) can him when he did come in tomorrow, (b) demand he bring in proof of his illness, like a doctors slip, in which case he was back to (a). It was Saturday night, too; it would be busy as all-hell in there, and with no dishwasher, and no notice, really, and, and,...

He knew he was making up excuses to be a chicken shit. What would dad do, in this case?, he wondered. Plainly, dad would have done his American Best, as dad always did. Dad would have gone to work, toughed it out, been a man, did his best for God, and Country, and the I.R.S. Dad had been an athlete in school.

Dad didn't much understand his quiet, bookish boy.

Tanner sat down naked on the bed, with only a robe wrapped around him. His fingers trembled as he reached for the long, snaking phone line. It felt evil coiled in his grasp. He pulled it toward him, finally, with a mounting sense of conviction.

It is imperative that I manage, somehow, to retain a sense of my sanity. If I go to work now, I will be filled to the brim with malignant rage. I will be noticeably, mentally unhinged. We can't allow that to happen. We won't allow that to happen. If needs be, I have sufficient savings to fall back on in case of dire emergencies, I can make it. I have never called off before. They will understand.

As he picked up the phone, his first words were, "H-hello. This is Tanner. Tanner Benjamin. My father just passed away."

Two

"Oh really," the voice at then end of the long phone cord sounded plainly unconvinced.

"Yes. They just called me and told me. He had been ill for some time. Cancer."

The voice stalled for a moment, rang up a customer, and said, "What exactly is it you do in the kitchen? This is Gary."

It was okay, he thought. It was all going to be okay, because it was Gary. Gary was an enormous, hulking man that looked like he shit solid bricks of steroids. He was a bartender. He was a doorman. He was always, seemingly, smiling. You get that much pussy, Tanner thought, and the world always seems like it is bathed in rosy light.

"Um, what kind of cancer was it exactly?"

Tanner balked. This was serious off-guard territory. If he slipped up here, he was a dead man.

“Colo-rectal”.

He said it without thinking. He knew what it must have sounded like.

“Um, is this some kind of a joke Tanner? Because I don’t find it very funny or amusing. We don’t have anybody we can call-in to fill your place, and I’m like, I dunno, you call me and you tell me your father just died of ass cancer, and I’m like, *who in the fuck would lie about something like that?* Tanner?”

Silence.

Suddenly, “I-I was too afraid to tell you, Gary. I was too afraid of the humiliation. But now I can say it. I can say it. I can say, ‘my father died of ass cancer and I love him’”.

Tanner began to bawl, really bawl hard. He heard dead silence on the end of the line for a full minute.

“Hey...hey, we can’t have you getting crazy on us. Our insurance won’t cover it.”

“I know, it’s just so fucking hard.”

“Hey, I know how you feel. I once had a puppy that got run over by a semi. This shit can be tough man. Look, I can’t give you the whole night off, but maybe we can have somebody sub for you until we close...give you time to get your shit together.”

Silence.

“Okay,” snuffle, “okay man,” Tanner wiped his soggy nose on his sleeve. It was dripping with fury. Half the night off? What the fuck did that mean?

“But, look, Tanner you’ve got to promise me that when eleven o’clock rolls around you’ll be back in that dish room busting nuts. I mean, you’re an important part of the team good buddy.”

Yeah, thought Tanner, as long as I bend over and take one for the team, I’m an important part every time.

“Yeah, yeah Gary, sure thing.”

Tanner switched over to what he always thought of as *an*

shucks little brother mode; he put on a more child-like tone. He found it appealed the latent homosexual in all of these guys.

"Tanner, Tanner lemme hear it..." Gary's voice suddenly grew, oddly, cheery.

"Ah-oo-uh." Gary said this into the phone, slowly. Loudly.

"Ah-oo-uh, Gary" Tanner, said, knowing he was expected to reply in the like. It was a strange, seal-call sound that is still widely in use by the U.S. military as a sort of secret handshake. Gary had been ROTC in college. Tanner's dad was ex-military.

"Be here. Eleven. Got it?"

"Sure thing. Thanks Gary. I mean it."

Tanner hung up the phone, wondering, not for the first time, what Gary might want to do to him if they were locked up in a cell together for an extended period of time.

Sure. A few more hours sleep, or time to dry a little, at least. It was what he needed. It was just now two, and he still had his job. He threw some clothes on, and wandered downstairs to smoke. But first he grabbed his work-shirt and satchel. Eleven o'clock, he sighed. He would play by the rules. He would be a good boy.

Little did he know then, he would never work inside of that stinking kitchen at Delcinos Sports Bar again.

Three

He went back upstairs and took a little nap. A few hours. He dreamed short, vicious, stabbing dreams that rocked him. But, upon awakening, he could remember what none of them were, really, about. He pulled on his clothes, tied on his floppy canvas shoes, and grabbed his satchel. He walked through the gloom downstairs.

The night was reasonably warm; the neighborhood was quiet as can be expected during the first few summer nights when life is just starting to creep back outside the front door after winter's icy claws have been retracted. He could smell backyard

cooking, and hear some (probably) blond teenage girl giggle on some back porch in the arms of her (probably) boneheaded boyfriend.

This was a nicer neighborhood. This was a piss-poor town, only thing to recommend it was the college, but on a night like tonight one could forget that one lived, essentially, in the backwaters of human civilization, in a piss-poor town that didn't give a damn how happy you were. Or weren't.

His feet beat the pavement. If he could have taken a satellite photo of himself, he would have seen a slightly stooped, twenty-seven year old male, very short, very bald, ragged in appearance, and with a pot belly. There was no getting around it: in a culture that seemed to take so much stock in beauty and wealth, he was a marked man.

"I will die a lonely, bitter fool," he often thought. "I will never make a million dollars. I will never be anybody's boss. I will never sleep with a decent woman."

Pause.

"And I will never drive a *Lexus*. *Damn*."

He tallied up some more of his inadequacies. It was mind-numbing, really, this constant self-deprecation; he felt it was a necessary buffer against himself and the expectations of the world. After all, didn't America care about it's best and brightest?

Wasn't that what he was? A man with an I.Q. over 150? A college graduate? A published writer?

Yes, yes, and yes. Still, it had not, for over a year, made much of an impact on anyone. Boo hoo.

The moon at least looked beautiful. A lovely crescent shaped sickle moon, adrift in the heavenly aether and oblivious to the little scurrying atomic humans that stared up at it on summer nights that promised the joys of good food, good sex, good times, to some.

He lived in a little rooming house down the street from the college. It was okay. At least he was within earshot of any loud noises. Loud noises were important to those that were,

perpetually, frustrated with silence. And he had always been frustrated so.

“I am a loser. I am a looooooser. But,” he consoled himself, muttering under his breath, “at least I am smarter than Gary. Colon cancer? Oh, jeezus, he actually bought it, I think.”

Flip-flop. Flip-flop. Down the cracked sidewalk, closer to campus. Closer to scantily-clad young women. Closer to alcohol. He kept moving. Just one drink. He kept shaking. The night seemed pregnant with possibilities. He shuddered.

Closer. It seemed like time was just about flying by.

He stopped by the Student Union to see if anyone he knew might be there. It was a large building, fifty years old, and he had once been a janitor there. That had been okay. He got to use his psychic powers.

He had been sitting by himself up in the hotel area of the large, t-shaped old building, surrounded by bath towels, and old magazines, and little complimentary soaps that smelled like douche. He was hiding, avoiding his crew leader. He didn't have to work very hard at this. The crew leader was out back near the dumpsters, smoking a joint.

He felt the first few, faintest stirrings of consciousness play within him. He had only woken up around forty-five minutes ago, and had struggled in the dark, five-in-the-morning weather to get to the Student Union. It was funny how nothing had seemed real. As he walked down the lonely streets and sidewalks, he could feel the age of the world, free at last from the energies of eighteen thousand sweating bodies, pulsate around him in the dark. The moon had been high and scythe-like then, as well.

Now here he sat, in an old room off the main hallway, flipping through an outdated *National Geographic* and smoking a cigarette. He could feel tendrils of pleasure lick him. It made him want to shit.

Suddenly, in the fluorescent glow from the fluorescent tube in the ceiling, he could see his smoke whirl into a little galaxy off

cancer. His eyes glazed over. His tummy rumbled. He slurped coffee. He felt good all over. Good and relaxed and pure.

Suddenly, out of the blue it hit him like a bolt.

Imagine an old man standing before you in immense brown corduroy pants. You have no idea how large the misshapen ass must be, but it must be very, very large and pendulous. The face has withered with age, and the jowls are a mass of flab. The pants, incidentally, are pulled up to the middle of the chest, old man style, and the shirt is some checkered piece that would have been better off in a Salvation Army bin. The breathing is a horrifying, rasping, wheeze. The old man walks with a claw cane. He looks like a jolt of lightening brought him back from the wrong side of the crypt.

That man was standing in front of him, now. Materialized, for a moment, in the smoke. Tanner nearly wet his workpants. He rubbed his eyes. He was sure he must have dozed off.

The mouth worked; the throat rasped. Something was coming. This foul revenant was trying, in some way, to communicate.

“*Chukka!*”

Was the best it could do. It defied logic. It stood between himself and the door.

It vanished, slowly, still making the same rasping groan in it's throat.

He flip-flopped through the glass doors and into the building. Best not to think about that right now.

There was a dining commons down the hall. Tanner could already hear the pounding lapping beat of rock music drone outside the double doors to the left. Coming out of those doors, incongruous with the office-like bearing of the Student Union, a group of trendy emo-rock fans walked across the hall and out the front doors. Tanner had come in the side.

Tanner had come *in* the side. Now, did he want to stay? Seven-thirty and all was well. A girl stood farther down the hall.

She had a perfectly-squared jet black haircut and a plaid mini-skirt.

“Hey,” he said, sounding gruffer than what he meant to. “Who is playing tonight?”

He already knew the answer to this, but he wanted to appear as if he was actually interested. The girl looked at him as if he had just asked if he could piss down the side of her face.

“What you mean you don’t know? Get a life, dude.”

“Hey, all I want to know is who is playing tonight, is all. I like these bands, I party with them sometimes. You ever party with any of the guys in the band?”

She got all huffy.

“Well, if you must know, as a matter of fact, my boyfriend is in, like, the hottest band around. They just got signed to an indi label in Indy.”

“A -what?”

“An indi label from Indi-*anapolis*.”

“Oh, that’s really cool,” he said. He attempted to sound like he had a grain of enthusiasm.

Suddenly, the ice seemed to break a little. Now she was doing her job, promoting her boyfriend’s band.

“Yeah. They’re called *Saturn in Retrograde*. So. Yeah.” She kept staring at him, and drew her *yeah* out as if the word, in and of itself, held some sort of magic significance, as if it meant that she was agreeing with him agreeing with her that *Saturn in Retrograde* was really something to get all hot and bothered about.

He turned, mumbled, “can I piss down your face?”

“Do I wanna trade some tapes? No, I don’t have any tapes to trade myself, but if you wait till after their set I’m sure Chuck has some demos he can lend you. Or sell.”

He went past the double doors. A skinny, wiry, bespectacled youth with an anti-racism patch and 140 facial piercing asked him if he had six dollars to donate for “the cause”. He didn’t, but managed to get past the table with only giving four bucks and collecting several ragged pieces of literature on the wonders of vegetarianism and the necessity of harassing those

that didn't agree with your particular viewpoint. He walked ahead into the darkness.

Tables had been cleared away, stacked haphazardly, but it was to no avail. The turn-out was rather poor. On stage, several lanky young substance abusers belted forth a kind of listless, droning, clap-trap music with occasional screamed vocals. The bass itself was overpowering; the creative gestalt was not. Ringed around the large, relatively empty floor, bored high school students crammed into booths usually reserved for campus dining. There were a multitude of backpacks thrust onto tables. All of them looked exactly alike: festooned with buttons and patches.

Non-conformity was astoundingly similar this season, he thought with a wry grin. *These kids never change.*

The young man singing looked like a tall, well-groomed, black-clad aardvark. His lyrics could not be discerned. His band looked as if they were practicing for part-time positions as living mannequins. The overpowering funk of their sweat was noticeable three feet from the podium.

A huge television set had been moved so they could set up their equipment. A skinny, anorexic-looking young girl with the same perfectly-bobbed hair swayed in time to the music. This was Saturday night.

He looked around. He wished it would have been some loud and fast nightmare, some *punk* band playing, and that a few more people had crowded in. Then he would have had an excuse to slam dance someone. As it was, he yawned, and walked out the opposite door.

He walked down the stairs and out back of the Student Union.

Did he dare look at his watch? It was dead of night dark, now.

He saw a very skinny, haggard-looking girl smoking a cigarette at the bottom of the steps. He walked down slowly,

cautiously, stopping at the bottom of the steps and, casually, taking out a cigarette.

She was having a very heated conversation on her cell phone, finally plopping her ass on the cement curb at the bottom of the stairs, next to one of the ashtrays. She was looking at Tanner, but talking to a (probable) bonehead boyfriend.

“Yes...I know...I fucking, hey, that’s not fucking fair! Well, he sure thinks it is, so maybe I should just...no, I haven’t been fucking him. Well, why don’t you just go get some fucking skank pussy off of your crack whore sister, big boy? Do you hear me? *Just go fuck your own sister you fucking dickless asshole.* Cause we’re through! Yeah, you just try it, cause if I ever see your sorry fucking face again I’ll blow your goddamn head off! Motherfucker! Ahhh!”

She clicked her phone off with a yell. Tanner sat there looking at her, dumbfounded.

That had all been loud. Very loud. Very, very loud

“My name’s Sabrina. Sorry about all that. When we get to yelling at each other, I just kind of lose it. Hey, can I ask you something?...*Uh, what’s your name?*”

“Tanner...Tanner Benjamin,” he said slowly.

“Hmm, Tanner Benjamin. Hey Tanner, tell me something: if I offered to give you a blow job right now, would you take me up on it?”

Four

She knelt down in his lap, pulling his cock free from his pants, and taking just the tip of it between her rosy red lips. He could see her high, jutting cheekbones suck in, work his cock, and he knew the deep liquid sensation of absolute, ecstatic pleasure.

He put his hand on the back of her head, guiding it down. But it didn’t want to rest there, and leave so much potential

territory unexplored. He put his explorers hand up her tee-shirt, which had ridden up as she knelt here to reveal her taut white belly. She had no bra on, just very small, plump pierced tits with deliciously engorged nipples. The oily sensuality of her hot bare flesh drove the spike of intensity further into his skull, and he unleashed a convulsive, brain-splitting orgasm.

And he couldn't very well scream out, you see, because they were still in the Student Union. Upstairs. In the reading room. It had been the closest place, and the only one he knew was easily accessible and relatively deserted. They were hidden in a little nook behind a bookcase full of moldering, cast-off volumes of largely monumental dross. Library indexes. Self-help volumes. Victorian travelogues.

She leaned back, hoisted her shirt, and revealed her two delectable little breasts. He greedily tongued them. He thrust his hands down the back of her jeans, taking in twin handfulls of fleshy, doughy goodness.

It was extraordinary. No, it was more than extraordinary; it was miraculous.

He had never taken into account that he might one day get laid in the Student Union.

It was later, as they were driving down the lonely roads out into the country, that he began to suspect that something was, as they say, seriously amiss.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see"

It would be a miracle if she didn't crash and kill them before they reached the destination that she seemed to be plummeting toward like a meteor. They had moved away from civilization, plummeting into the night like a swift, torpedo-like member might push into the aching crevice of a moist and fertile orifice. He was swept from his feet by this woman that he didn't even know.

"Where are we going? Can you tell me where were going?"

He was not frightened. Not much, at any rate. He was

actually somewhat exhilarated. The cool air blew through the crack in the window, whipping her short, frazzled hair around her face in a manner that was almost cherubic.

She stood on the rusted bridge, frail and terrible and full of fairy favors in the light of the milky moon. He approached her slowly, wondering why, in the space of but two hours he had been foisted into the bosom of a strange dream.

“What did you want to be when you were a boy, Tanner?”

She looked at him down the long, angular plane of her hollow cheekbone. It seemed like she were asking the deepest, gravest philosophical question he had ever heard in his life.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not a boy anymore, I suppose. But I still am. I can’t help it. Life seems like it has never held much for me. Much good, at any rate.”

“I think you underestimate yourself. Do you know what I wanted to be? A ballerina.”

“Every little girl wants to be ballerina. You’ll have to do better than that for deep, dark confessions.”

She smiled, and then frowned, and he noticed again that her face seemed to have the odd quality of hiding whatever actual emotion was there behind it’s complete opposite. Because, he did not feel, seriously, that she had meant to smile then, or frown. Or convey a sense of any feeling that could be accorded a natural, human feeling.

“I am different.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure I can tell you. I’m not sure you’d believe me. You’ll just have to trust me tonight. The night is still young.”

They looked out over the churning blackness of the water that swept out of that foul state and must have found it’s own true roots in some dark country where human feet seldom tread. Here, they were alone, for the first time. Above them, only a cold expanse of sweeping stars. And only country all around.

“I’m not a human being.”

"I...could tell that, frankly."

"No. I mean---it has nothing to do with the other stuff we've done tonight. I mean, I'm not like you. I'm not solid like you."

He bent over to rub the skinny, pale arm. It felt like a cold stick that had been covered in skin.

"You feel real enough," he told her, and began to move closer to her again. Her smell seemed to have grown somewhat more bitter; more stale. He was a man whose deepest intuitive leaps were often governed by scent.

"I have never," he stated flatly, "had a woman offer, out of the blue---what you gave me tonight."

She looked at him again, and the expression of her face was one of vulpine hunger that nearly drove his blood to churn.

"It was about time, boy. And there are other things that we can do tonight. Secret things. Ending things."

"Really. Like what?"

She turned and put her arms over the rusted metal railing. Below them, the water still brooded in tiny currents and eddies of time, swirling and swimming and catching secrets in its liquid depths.

"I want you to help me a kill a man. Some men. Maybe a few men. Will you help me?"

Five

He considered. He wanted, badly at times, to wreak some sort of vengeance against God, humanity, what have you. It all amounted to the same swell of rage he felt when, upon awakening, he looked in the mirror to realize that he was still himself. It was not fair. Did the fates have no pity, then? It was not fair.

He looked at the black lake. Though the moon shined heavy in a cloudless sky, there was no light that was going to penetrate that water. It was some sort of living symbol of the

soulless poverty he had just plummeted into with this rare, strange bird of a woman. This harlot; this alien.

“I don’t want to. Do I have a choice?”

She looked at him quizzically for a moment. And then she said, “what have I done to you? Have I unleashed a beast in you Tanner? Is that what happens when men get too close to me? You know, that man that I was talking to on the phone? Just before I gave you head?”

“Yes. The man on the phone.” He looked down. He could feel somehow that after tonight his life would never be the same again.

“What man?” She turned and began to walk back to the car. He grabbed her arm, ferociously, for a second, and with a strength he would not have accorded himself, he spun her around until she was face to face with him.

He could see then, the terrible aspect of her great beauty, how she must have used it in a supernatural measure to grasp the souls of men, and crush them for what they were worth. And she had done it time and again.

Even a man as naive as himself could see that.

“Why do you want me to help you kill? Can’t you do it yourself? You don’t strike me as the kind who couldn’t do it herself.”

She smiled. She didn’t know the reason herself. She was going on instinct.

And, truthfully, don’t we all?

He sat belching beer in the ratty old chair in front of the tube. It was fight night, the old lady gone to do her waitress gig, and he left to his own devices. With sports. With pornography. With all of the necessities of a well-rounded intellectual diet.

It was 2004, and he had no idea what had become of ten years of living. Or, existing, at any rate. He had stuck it out with her, Joan, because he had stuck it into her. A resultant pregnancy later, and everything he had ever hoped and dreamed of had gone

running through his fingers as if he had just taken a monstrous runny shit in his own hands. And the kid hadn't even lived to be five. Ironic.

It had been a drunk driver, and his own dear sweet daughter whom he detested like a pile of angry flies was swept from this world and all of its woes, and buried rather unceremoniously beneath a tree in the darkest patch of the children's cemetery. He had been permanently crippled, offered a government paycheck, and had become, increasingly, a burden to his skinny, neurotic, grieving Joan, who lived on pills, cheap cigarettes and bad romance novels.

It was television that offered him his own respite, occasionally, from the world of horrid drabness that seemed to encircle him in its joyless embrace. Tonight it was going to be the San Francisco Padres playing, but any other night it might be the plastic-surgery addled visage of some pathetic actress. Or cop shows.

His name was Bill, he of the lusty belch.

There was a knock at the door, which was damn peculiar for eleven-thirty at night, but he managed to hobble from the chair with his four-claw cane and make his way over to the window. He looked out. Nobody. He scanned the darkness warily for a moment.

Damn. What if it was some sort of drug fiend or gang member? The resounding knock re-asserted itself. He crept over to the spy-hole.

He breathed a sigh of relief. It was Neighbor Roger.

He opened the door slowly. Fear had been replaced by consternation.

"Can I help you, Roger?" he said, as if he wanted to do nothing of the sort.

"Uh, yeah, uh Bill, I was wondering, um, well---my t. v. is on the fritz, and I was wondering if maybe you could use some company while you were watching the game. I know I should

have called first, but, ah..."

Oh great, thought Bill, all I need is fucking Roger over here drinking my beer, eating my fucking food.

But he said, "sure...sure thing Rog. Um, just come on in, make yourself at home."

Neighbor Roger, who was forty, divorced, perpetually broke, and always smelled, faintly, of b.o. walked unsteadily into the living room.

He sat down on the rumpled couch, taking out a cheap cigar, and thanking heavens that Bill had never much had the courage to say know to anyone.

"Uh, hey, can I get a beer, old buddy?"

Bill stiffened. He already had anticipated that.

"Uh...look, Rog, I uh...well, the fact is, is that Joanie is getting off early tonight, see...and though, you know, I want you stay and all, I don't know how she would feel if she came home and found you passed out on the couch or something."

Roger looked at him a minute from underneath the lid of his bushy brows. He gave a quaint little smile, as if to say, *"look whose done been pussy-whipped, good buddy. I wouldn't have thought it of you. I don't know what the hell this world is coming too, anyway, when regular guys like us can't even get together and have a few a few beers and watch the game without some bodied old lady getting uptight about it."*

Roger leaned forward on the couch, thrust one huge, gnarled hand into the fold of his bomber jacket, and took out a small paper sack.

"Yeah, good buddy, I thought of that. So I thought maybe I'd bring over something to maybe help sweeten the whole night out a little. Lookey here---"

He took from the contents of the sack one pornographic videocassette and one tiny, miniscule bag of what, presumably, was marijuana.

"Ya got me, doc. I ran out of beer, and I had a little smoke left, so I thought maybe I'd bring it over and share with you."

Bill sighed, and sat down with a plop that might have been

a forced fart.

“Aw...fuck Joanie,” he said finally. “ A couple valium and she’ll be happy again.”

Six

“ Where in the fuck is he? It’s eleven-thirty. I could kill that little twerp!”

Gary sat in the upstairs office of Delcino’s Sports Bar, brooding. Tanner Benjamin had, predictably, decided to take the entire evening off. That was not the agreement. That was not the plan. That was a serious breach of the mores and folkways established between himself, and that little ogre.

He looked out the long two-way mirror at the crowded floor. It was Saturday night, it was party time, and they were one man short in the kitchen. That made an already hot, miserable environment that much worse. It was the hostility factor. Every time he had gone downstairs and into the back he could feel it: unhappy employees. It was not what he needed. It was serious violation of---

“The mores and folkways...Tanner Benjamin, you are in serious violation of the *folkways*.”

Three hours from now, Rachel Wasserman would be choking on his monster cock, drunker than a dorm full of sorority sisters, and he would forget about the dickless wonder with the ho-hum expression that had no-showed and left him one man short in the kitchen. He saw this phrase in his mind as if it had been lit up like a Las Vegas sign: ONE MAN SHORT IN THE KITCHEN. It made him want to shit on somebody’s head.

He put his palm out and punched it with his curled fist. Daddy had always said you couldn’t trust short guys. “They’re just a tad more vicious, a little sneakier, and psycho. Watch out: they’ll hit you when you’re not looking, sport.”

And Daddy was always right about these things.

And it stood to reason, didn't it? If you had a dick the size of a gum drop, weren't you much more likely to be hostile, to be sneaky, to be in violation of the...mores? To not give a fart in a high wind about the *folkways*?

But it was okay. He was already fired. Tanner Benjamin was NOT a "team player". Delcino's was all about "team players." It was all about the *mores*.

(He had heard all about mores and folkways in that stupid fucking sociology class he had to take to graduate. The professor, Milt Seebaum, was a skinny, pencil-necked dweeb that must have been on the high side of sixty. But that was okay, because he was getting an A+ in Sociology. He made damn sure Milt Seebaum knew that in advance.)

Gary sighed. It was gonna be a long damn night, but he knew what he had to do. As a Manager. As the guy that the boss depended on to make sure everybody hat was drinking here on Saturday left their cares and concerns at the door. It was his job to see that they ate the grill to ashes, drank themselves to stupefaction, and bathed in each others sweat out on the floor. This was America, after all.

He walked over to the closet behind his desk and popped open the door. Out in a cat walk area over the ceiling were several boxes of uniforms. He picked an appropriate shirt and an apron. Fun.

"One man short in the kitchen, one short man in the kitchen." he sang to himself.

He scratched his balls. He laughed.

One short man in the kitchen.

"Not!"

He walked downstairs to the dish pit.

"Hey Milt, how are your classes going?"

Milt Seebaum looked down and saw the little, dainty, form of Patricia Ireland standing in front of him. It was unlike her to

be attending a university theatre performance, but he let it slide.

“Any hidden pools of genius to be tapped?”

He laughed.

“Fraid not, Pat. It’s been all downhill since the sixties, I’m afraid. I didn’t know you went in for theatrics.”

“Oh,” she laughed. “I like to catch a play now and again. Besides, not like I have much else to do on Saturday night.”

She suddenly got a kind of sly little look on her face.

“Say Milt, how about a little night cap, old boy? Talk about the play? Hmm?”

Pat had a way about her of making even the most innocuous suggestion sound like a coarse joke. Milt started to say no.

Then he thought about the lonely living room. The cold bed. The TV. dinner and the old copy of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which he had read three times.

“Sure. Why not. The night is young. Let’s show these whipper snappers they aren’t the only ones who know how to spend a Saturday night. But why don’t we eat a bite first? I’m feeling a little dizzy, child.”

Pat grabbed his arm. He marveled to feel the strength of her grasp.

It was sometime later that they pulled up into the low-lying expanse of a darkened, run-to-riot neighborhood. They sat in the car for a few moments, and Tanner collected himself.

Everything seemed to be happening too fast. Fast motion. Time to slow down, take things cool, make up some excuse to have to go home. He was going to be a chicken shit, and, right now, being a chicken shit seemed like the safest possible way to operate.

“Uh, uh, Sabrina.” Pause. “I don’t think I can...”

He trailed off, letting his words lose themselves in the cramped, stale air of the filthy car. It seemed like this night would

never end. And what time was it? He started to look down at his watch, thought better of it, and instead looked out at the house they were parked across the street from.

It was a modest house gone to seed in a neighborhood that must have, long ago, seen better days. Inside, what perfect drones were still alive would be nestled all snug in their beds, watching der wittle TV's, thinking the same series of dull thoughts. What to eat. What to wear. Who to fuck.

Was he even a part of any of it?

"I can understand if you're scared, Tanner. Really I can."

He could tell by the sound of her voice that she was lying, rubbing his inadequacies in. She had tasted his soul for one white hot moment, and now she was using that fact against him, using her sex as a means of leverage. Tanner wanted to weep.

The neighborhood looked strangely cold, even though the evening was warm. It seemed to have collected it's odd assortment of strange, broken little dwellings the way a Victorian showman might have collected hydrocephalic twins.

It was hard to imagine there was actual life here.

"What if we get caught, Sabrina? Jesus, I can't believe this, I don't even know who the fuck you are, yet here I am."

"Funny, huh. Do you trust me?"

Pause.

"No. Not at all."

She smiled, then let her hand stray over to his lap.

"Then the feeling is mutual."

Suddenly, she was on top of him, grinding, running her fingers through his hair savagely. She opened his mouth with her tongue, jabbing it down his throat in one delicious, wet thrust.

He had her jeans down in bare minutes, clutching her as she unzipped him, and they managed to guide him in. They began to rock, furiously, and she kept asking him, her voice rising to a piercing shriek, and then falling suddenly in husky guttural, "do you trust me? No...Do you trust me?...no... No! No! Ah, ah, ah!"

He managed to bounce her meager frame with increasing violence, feeling the warmth of her womanhood spread out across her lap. Suddenly, she thrust her arms over her head, and her blouse was hastily flung aside. Her breasts were much larger than her had first realized, and glistened with sweat in the moonlight. This was perfect, he reckoned. This was ecstasy. This was how sex was meant to be.

She forced him to stop for agonizing moments, long enough to lean against the dashboard, and kick her legs up and to the left in a position that made it, miraculously, possible for her take off her skintight jeans, as well. Now she was as naked as the day she was born, in his arms, in a parked car in the middle of some quaint neighborhood.

Suddenly, the intense dementia of absolute intoxicating pleasure exploded behind his eyes, and erased all doubts. He came furiously, screaming her name, crushing her taut torso to his own.

She rolled off of him a moment later, his seed dribbling from between her legs.

“Do you trust me now?”

He looked at her. He was bathed in sweat, gasping, shivering in the post-orgasmic glow.

“No. But...I’ll do what you say. If you can do that for me again.”

She reached over and stuck her finger between his slackened lips.

“Anytime. Now...”

She pulled out the nickel-plated revolver. It looked as evil as death in the darkness.

Bill and Roger sat on the couch, merrily stoned. The ball game had been completely forgotten. On the television screen, a young woman was bent down on all fours while several men had sex with her.

“Hey good buddy, I sure am glad you came over now...” Bill sounded as if he had just woke up from a deep sleep and found himself in someone else’s house. His statements were punctuated by a kind of sniggering, choking laughter, and then long moments of silence where he simply maintained stoically and looked as if he was undergoing a wave of paranoia.

Roger had tossed back much of Bill’s beer by now, and was enjoying the video. The young women on the video was getting a good screwing by some biker buddies of his...real classy gents. Real men.

They called that sort of party a *turning out*.

“Hey man, get me another beer.”

Bill blubbered for a minute. He was somewhere between laughter, panic, and real annoyance at being talked to like a slave in his own goddamn house. But Roger, quite frankly, had always sort of made him nervous. Even when he came by to do “odd jobs”, or help with remodeling the house. Roger made him nervous. His hands were too big, rough, his muscles still discernible beneath a few extra pounds of American Fat.

He sputtered, “well...get it yourself, motherfucker.”

He had sounded amiable, but Roger said,

“No. Don’t think so Bill. Not this time. I want you to get it for me. See, I don’t think you know who I am. Man, I could order your head in a basket, Bill. That’s a fact. I use to ride with the Outlaws, man.”

Bill was stoned, but he wasn’t stoned enough, at this point, to not know that Roger was fully-capable of beating the hell out of him. And Roger had been to jail before. And he must have already been half-lit when he came over.

“ See Bill, I just like to see your fat, crippled ass waddle over to the fridge. It makes me horny.”

Bill burst out laughing.

“This ain’t a joke, Bill. Now go get me a goddamn beer before I break the only bones in your face that ain’t ugly. Now.”

Bill got up, the entire room dancing circles around him, and

if he had been any less lucky than what he already was, he would have keeled over onto the carpet in a useless heap and let Roger Atkins stomp his head into the floor with one size eleven shoe. He made it into the kitchen, barely, lights exploding in front of his eyes. He reached for the handle of the fridge, and as stoned and drunk as he was, he understood, in an imperfect way at that point, that he had just been humiliated. But the dope addled content of his brain hadn't yet put the reality of the situation together in a way that was absolutely coherent. He turned.

For a moment, he almost forgot what he was doing. As he had turned, it was as if he had trails of tiny cartoon stars and sparkles engulf him. He thought that if he simply kept twisting around, he might be able to conjure enough of them to lose himself in their strange magnificence.

"Hey Bill, what're you doing? What about my beer?"

Then he remembered Roger, and he moved, with much difficulty, forward over the dirty linoleum.

"Hey Bill, old buddy, did I ever tell you about the time I fucked your wife?"

Sabrina had simply climbed from the car, naked as a jaybird, and walked calmly across the street, as if she had already been programmed for this particular assassination (he no longer had much doubt this was what it was going to be.) Her white body looked surreal, framed against the image of the suburban front porch; even stranger, considering that she was carrying the gun.

She had, he thought, at least stopped to slip her shoes on before she got out. He smiled, in spite of things. Maybe this was just some sort of bizarre joke.

She walked up the darkened driveway, and a motion light suddenly came on, flooding the entire scene in stark, white visibility. She turned, put her arms up as if to suggest surprise or joy, and then motioned for him to follow. He got out of the car on wobbling legs, shaking. He was sure he was going to end up in

jail before the night was over.

Fuck it. Fuck it. It was too late. He didn't know what he was doing. He was starting to actually enjoy the fear. It was more exhilarating, at least, than his typical apathy.

He walked slowly. As he approached her, his eyes took in every single contour of that perfectly erotic form. She seemed ready-made for pleasing men, a body that might have belonged to any super-model and a shock of the thickest raven hair that could be conceived. And her face had an animalistic sexuality that was hypnotic; it was an arch of the brow, a come hither look from the dark, dark eyes that you were able to lose yourself in.

I am going to commit a possible major felony with a woman that I haven't even known for an entire day. What in the hell is happening? Is any of this real?

As he approached her, walking slowly up the incline of the driveway, she seemed like a goddess. Like she had ridden the beam of that motion light across celestial space to be here with him. He could hear his heart beat in his ears.

Tanner Benjamin had been alive for twenty-seven years.

In twenty seven years he had seen, or so he thought, just about everything that there was to see. And what he hadn't seen in person, he had seen on TV. That was good enough. That was real enough.

His experience with violence was that it was usually aimed from the stronger to the weaker. Funny, he thought, the way that that happened. If you were small, if you minded your own business, and God knew, if you wear perfectly innocent, you had just better watch it. You had it coming.

The guys that he knew that meted violence were, invariably, always the same type: macho bonehead guys with big peckers and no brains. Guys that got all the girls.

Those guys sometimes ended up in prison. Invariably, really, if they couldn't channel their testosterone-driven rage into

something that society looked upon with favor. Like a cop. A soldier. A hired thug.

This was the way of the world. It had always been thus. He did not know if it had ever been any different, but he knew one thing:

The little guy always got it in the ass.

So when Sabrina had walked, calmly, naked breasts bouncing, up to the front door that was just then opening slowly, cautiously, and then asked at gunpoint if she could enter, he knew that he had just seen something in real time up front that he had never seen before in his life.

He followed quickly, losing himself in the sheer absurdity of the moment. All sound seemed to have been blacked out by the heavy thump of his own beating pulse in his ears.

He saw a large, rough-looking man bound off of the couch in the unkempt living room and began to make flapping movements with his jaw. He was screaming something, but Tanner had no idea what, because the next sound was the sharp report of the pistol as it exploded outward into the reeking air.

The large man's head exploded outward over his left ear, splattering the wall behind him with brain matter and grue. He plummeted backward as solid as a felled tree. There was no more movement.

For the first time Tanner noticed that a corpulent, terrified little man was trying desperately to hobble to his withered legs and escape. He crawled on his hands and knees, whimpering and pleading, and Sabrina followed, stalking him like a psychotic, blood-freaked alley cat. He pushed open the kitchen door with one savage thrust of his meaty arm, and Sabrina let the door swing almost closed before she fired through it. Her dappled ass drew taut at each recoil.

Tanner stood in the former living room, now dying room, with his jaw dropped to his chin. It had all been so fucking easy for her to do. He had never known that meting out death could be so quick, so

painless, so easily accomplished without consideration aforethought. He approached the man on the living room floor cautiously. He wasn't sure that he wasn't dreaming.

"Hello...uh, hello. Sir?"

The face that he looked into had been frozen in a moment of time, the death-agony written on the face in a permanent rictus of shock. He had no idea what this big sonofabitches crime had been, but he knew one thing for certain now: he had paid the price.

Tanner began to throw up convulsively, heaving up a yellowish pussy substance mixed with the coffee he had drank earlier, upon awakening. He turned from the body and let loose in a puddle near the television. On the television, the same skinny young woman was still being fucked senseless by the mongrel horde of seemingly never-ending male porn sidekicks.

The gritty camera zoomed in close, capturing the twitching spasms of her face. Tanner dropped to his knees, trying to evacuate the last of the spew from his gut. When he looked up, he realized for the first time why they had come here at all.

The woman on the screen was clearly Sabrina.

She then came out of the kitchen, saying nothing, but seeming full of contempt at his weakness. Tanner got up shakily, slowly, and approached the woman as if she might be a coiled serpent.

"Why?"

It was all he could think to say. He was literally, for the first time in a long while, beyond even the capacity to be frightened. Now, he found himself simply filled with wonder at what had just transpired in front of his own eyes.

The naked woman stepped to the side, and with one arm swung open the bullet-ridden kitchen door. Tanner was too stunned, at this point, to do anything but giggle.

The little man, the little fat cripple, had crawled to, of all

place, the refrigerator, and had grasped the door handle. He must have become confused, thought he was at the back door. She had him cornered, the gun held out tight in her beautiful, long fingers. He had managed to raise his bulk a few inches from the linoleum tiles, a look of absolute transcendent agony written on his fleshy face. It had pulled the refrigerator door ajar, with him hanging from the handle by both hands, in his death pose.

Then she had shot him twice. Blood flooded the yellow kitchen tiles in slow, slurping slicks...creating a little river of gore beneath the oddly-hanging body. His fingers had tightened in death until, hours later, it would take the morgue wagon guys much prying to get them loose from the refrigerator door handle. They would comment later how it seemed grimly humorous to see the fat man die trying to lift himself. It was comparable to the woman who died standing up. He realized, half-humorously, that they were going to have to draw the chalk outline halfway up the fridge door.

One for Ripley.

To make matters worse, Sabrina had stepped in the blood, and lazily left red foot prints---everywhere.

They both turned off the lights, locked the doors, and left as quickly and painlessly as they had come. It was over.

Before they had left, Sabrina had carefully wiped up her feet with paper towel, which she had then simply thrust to the floor. She had then mused her footprints, but Tanner, still struck speechless realized that they must have left evidence all over the place. All over.

They walked, almost as if they were having a mutual dream, slowly back to the car. Sabrina put on her clothes, and began to drive.

Seven

Milt Seebaum followed Pat Ireland into her little apartment, noting the soft smell of womanhood as it rose to greet his nostrils. His own place never smelled like that, he thought bitterly.

Inside, the refuse of an over-intellectual woman that had sublimated her femininity in a pile of boring course work, lay scattered around the dim room. Text-books lay half open, revealing diagrammatical constructions that were as perplexing as the inside of Pat Ireland's head. Mountains of papers were stacked precariously upon a flimsy computer desk. A few dirty dishes rounded everything out.

It was a normal, boring, compact place; the place a thirty-three year old faculty member might be expected to live. There were framed posters of The Beatles, and a screen saver of Stonehenge. There was the regulation poster of the Eiffel Tower bought in Paris. It was bourgeois chic.

"Make yourself comfortable Milt. Want something to drink?"

He felt the first few stirring of excitement grip him. How long had it been since he had been offered a drink by a young woman?

"Sure," he said as evenly as possible. He was getting a little nervous now. What was she expecting him to say, "hell no"?

"How about a beer? It's what's handy."

"Oh, a beer would be just fine I think." *Who am I kidding,* he thought, *I usually go to bed with warm milk.*

"Here, I have Dosequis, and I hope you like it...I like it." She came back into the living room and sidled up on the rattan couch. The coffee table in front of them was cluttered as everything else, bearing a heap of periodicals and fluff magazines that must have been a weakness for Pat Ireland.

"You know, Pat," Milt Seebaum began warily, "you are the only person I know who keeps *Sassy* and *The New England Journal of Literary Science* in the same place".

Pat seemed nonplussed. To be perfectly honest, she hadn't

brought Milt Seebaum here to talk about magazines.

“Oh, I don’t know...one’s just as interesting as the other don’t you think?”

“Oh...I don’t think either one of them could be accused of being very interesting. My personal favorite is *Field and Stream*.”

“Mm, really? Never saw you as much of an outdoor type, Milt. Thought you’d be cloistered away in some dark corner with the *American Journal of English Literature*...something academic, intellectual, respectable. You are respectable, aren’t you?”

She lifted her beer, polished it off, and asked if he wanted some wine. He had barely taken two sips of his Dosequis.

“Wine? Uh, sure, yeah...you know Pat, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me.”

She said nothing, but got off the couch slowly, keeping him in her gaze in a steady, feline way that excited him terrible. She disappeared into the kitchen, and he gazed around the room in elated panic. There was something about being made drunk in the presence of some strange woman, even a woman as boringly familiar as Pat Ireland. Oh, he already knew the game was afoot, yesiree. Didn’t even have to worry about playing his cards right, did he? She was in the driver’s seat.

She came back out a few moments later, carrying a bottle of cheap (read: undrinkable) wine, and two bell-shaped glasses.

“Take. Drink. Relax...mm, that’s good.” She sipped casually on the white wine. Drink enough of it, and even Milt Seebaum looked like Fabio.

Milt took some wine, some beer, and some more wine. His head was pounding. His heart felt like a little ticker ticker machine. He absent-mindedly worried about his blood pressure.

“You know Milt, I have some ulterior motives in inviting you over. I hope you don’t think I’m being too forward, but, uh, well...I don’t quite know how to say...”

He gulped. He leaned forward. He hadn’t been intimate

with a woman in a dozen years. It was all part and parcel of being a tall, hook-nosed, living equivalent of Ichabod Crane. It went with the professional territory

“Y-you want to have intercourse.” He slurred, leaning forward a little too much. The alcohol always did have a heavy effect on him, and he never, really, drank.

“W-well, jeezus, Milt, you sure have a romantic way of putting it! How about: I would like to have a romantic fling with an older, attractive co-worker? Is that okay?”

She laughed. She moved closer to him on the couch. He could feel her hot breath play against the side of his neck. He was old enough to be her father. What was the game here?

“Why me, Patricia? Why in the world would a young, attractive woman like you want some crusty, doddering old fool like me?”

She rubbed his neck with her index finger, and smiled.

“Well, let’s just say that there’s something about a man’s mind that attracts me. And, Milt, baby, nobody has a mind quite like yours. You know it. It’s like you stepped out of a time warp.”

Time warp, he thought. That is exactly right. I don’t belong here. I belong in some moldy library, holding hands with Longfellow. Well, here I am. Now what?

He started to shrink away from her.

“Patricia...now, I don’t exactly rush into these things. Never have, never will...”

Suddenly, she lunged on top of him, pressing him down, her mouth flowering open across his own. He was quite liquid now, groping her tightly, madly, the blood rushing to his head. His heart beat like a drum.

“O-okay. I understand. I’m a male rape victim.”

They both began to laugh.

Fuck Longfellow, he thought, and pulled her close to him.

It was in the bedroom, in the darkness, where they had finally cast aside their clothes, and really got into heated, manic

love-making. Milt had never thought such intense passion could be mustered on a Saturday night. It hadn't in years, seemed like a possibility that was open.

Later, as they lay in the darkness, letting the spent passion of the evening linger in the air like some rapidly dissolving force of electricity, he asked Patricia again, why, in fact, she had chosen to be with him.

"Because. There was just something about you that seemed, I dunno, promising. Special. Different...like you weren't just out for a piece of ass and a good meal. Like you made love the way you wrote...or, at least, from what I've read of you. You know women and poets."

"You weren't too bad yourself, dear. I don't think I've had a night like this within recent memory."

"It doesn't have to be the only time. Honestly. We can do it again. Tonight. If you want."

She curled up next to him, and he pulled her close with one skinny arm. He still felt troubled. In fact, the feeling was actually increasing as the pleasure wore off.

"But is this really right? I mean, I mostly pride myself on my ability to keep one notch above the rest of the real, raw, world. Do you know what I mean? I'm old. I'm not sure I don't...I dunno."

"Feel like a shit heel? Immoral? Surely, two adults can jump right in the sack and not worry a damn about it. 'Fraid of committing a little white sin?'"

He felt glum for a moment. He wasn't sure she was ever going to be able to understand him.

"Well, damnit, you said it yourself: it's as if I stepped out of a time warp. I'm an old fuddy-duddy. A gentleman. I don't just jump into bed with anyone out of pure animal *lust*."

He had a half-mocking, half-serious tone in his voice, but she could tell he was masking some small regret.

She made a *ptui* sound with her lips, and said, "Oh, Mr. Uptight Prude, are you afraid I've set you on the cold, hard path

toward becoming a womanizer? We're you raised Catholic?"

"No."

"Well then, as long as I'm not a choir boy, what are you worried about?"

In truth, he could think of nothing.

They drove through the interminable night, the rode stretching out before them in endless sameness. Mile after mile, the yellow dividing line sweeping past in blurring disarray, the expanse of darkened farmland picturesque with rotting barn and fence post making the evil night seem as deep and dark and bottomless as the pits of hell that Tanner Benjamin thought, surely, must be waiting for him below.

She held the wheel in a tight little grip. She didn't seem to even be slightly aware of the full ramifications of the brutal double-murder she had just performed. He corrected himself. That *they* had just performed.

He was an accomplice after the fact.

He was going to prison---no ifs, ands, or buts about it. He wondered what it would be like, confined for life in a sweaty, filthy cage with large, brutal men forcing him to do horrible, painful, humiliating things that he scarcely wanted to imagine.

He had once read a prolonged, torturous article on prison rape. It had made him physically nauseous for several hours afterward. *And, let's face it*, he thought, *if I go in, they're going to make me a bitch.*

He suddenly cried out, as if he had just realized the full importance of what had transpired.

"How in the hell can you be so calm at a time like this? Do you realize when they catch us, what they're going to do to us? Sabrina! You just killed two men in cold blood!"

He was actually screaming now. He was terrified, felt like he was on the verge of some sort of complete breakdown. Then he thought that that might be the best thing.

Maybe he could cop an insanity plea and end up in an

institution.

He continued to yell for a few minutes, and so she began to yell too. So he yelled louder. And on. And on.

Until, finally, she brought the car to a screeching halt at the side of the road. She popped on the dome light.

“Tanner! Tanner, calm the fuck down. Calm the fuck down, or I will shoot you. Do you hear me, Tanner? I will shoot you now, and dump you out here in the middle of flying saucer country, and nobody will know the difference.”

He stared at her in amazement. He knew she wasn’t bluffing. He felt ice water pump through his veins. When was this night going to end?

“Tanner, do you see anyone fucking following us? Do you?”

She spoke sharply. He shook his head no, too scared to make a peep.

She breathed in. She breathed out.

“Now, the reason that you see no one following us is because nobody knows it was us. Or me. I’d take the fucking rap. I killed them. I did it. You didn’t know what was gonna go down, did you?”

He shook his head no, and slightly whimpered.

“Now, stop being a fucking baby. Nobody is gonna chase us down, tonight, or any other night, because nobody fucking cares. Okay? Now---”

And she shifted gears, and slowly got back out on the road.

“I am going to get some food. Okay? You too. You look like you could use some coffee, at least. There’s a diner up here, somewhere. Gonna be okay?”

He shook his head yes. He didn’t think he was ever going to be okay again.

She sat in the corner of her room, looking at the shadows dance on the wall. It was all she could say about the spectral fingers cast by the bushes in the moonlight. Those fingers danced;

invited. She would use them to take her to sleep.

Sleep, all I really want. All I can really count on. The only comfort I have.

Downstairs, she could hear mommy fighting with Bruce. Big, stupid Bruce, who drank and stank and farted, and mommy thought was just great. Wonderful. Her new “daddy”.

Bruce, who drove a truck and watched wrestling, and sometimes looked at her in a way that scared the holy hell out of her, sometimes. But what did mommy care. When Bruce brought over dope, or money, or what have you. Mommy was in her own world these days.

Now she was yelling at him. Calling him a “worthless mother fucker”. Well, she could agree with that, at least.

She listened. All she could make out were a whole lot of cuss words, and something about Julie. Somebody (some *bitch*, to use mommy’s words) named Julie did something and now mommy was mucho pissed. Mucho. And mommy was, usually, pretty laid back.

Now, she could hear the door slam. It must have been Bruce, because she could hear mommy rush to the phone and dial up her friend Ronnie Hampton. Ronnie was sixteen and pregnant, and usually up for babysitting for the evening.

“H-hello? Mrs. Hampton. This is Jill Lavender. Um, I was wondering if Ronnie might be interested in coming over for a few minutes and keeping an eye on Lindsey. Yes, I know it’s late, but it’s an emergency. My father has taken ill again, and I really need to go and make sure he is okay. Can you put her on, please?”

Mommy had that “will not take no for an answer” sound in her voice that she used sometimes. Lindsey rolled over on her side and listened.

“Hi Ronnie, this is Jill. I know it might be kind of late to ask, but I need you to come over and keep an eye on Lindsey while I go out for just an hour or so. You can? Okay, okay great, oh thank you very much Ronnie, I really, really, owe you. Okay, I’ll be waiting. Bye.”

Lindsey could hear mommy downstairs rushing around, putting on her coat, grabbing up her billfold. Mommy thought that she must have been asleep, by now. Surely.

Lindsey rolled over on her back and stared out at the sky. The stars seemed like magnificent little dots in the heavens. She had read, somewhere, that some people thought that there might be life on other planets. She hoped that there was. Life. Somewhere. Else.

She looked at the swaying shadows on the wall. The branches of the trees outside. The fingers seemed to be curling around, seemed to be inviting her. To sleep. To dream.

Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take.

She felt her lids grow heavy. Ronnie Hampton was nice. If she woke up early tomorrow, Ronnie would make her breakfast and watch cartoons with her till mommy felt like getting up.

She slept. It was bliss, in a world where mommies did what they were supposed to do. Always.

Bruce McGonnagill pumped the engine until it roared.

Speeding. He knew he had better cool his engines soon. But, damnit, that damn broad had made him sore tonight. Mad as hell, to be perfectly honest.

So, he got some on the side. Big deal. Wasn't like he was married to that mop, and even if he was, so what? He was a man. He was just following his biological prerogative.

He chased down an alley, pumped it again, came out the other side with a screech, blowing gravel. What the hell was he doing? Was he just going to ride around like some aimless fuck till dawn. No.

Bruce had been in jail twenty times for twenty different things. It didn't much matter to him if he got pulled over or not. What the fuck. Go for broke. Live fast and die young. It was the way of the beast.

He popped the tab on a Bud and set it in the crotch of his jeans. He was gonna scout for some pooter tonight. Hot stuff, something young. Something to throw in that mops face, and make her see that she needed *him*. He didn't fucking need her.

"No sir. Not me. Not this tiger."

It seemed like the road was never going to end. Above them, the stars were strewn in galactic wonderment, shining their naked truth down upon a midnight world where life had stopped making sense for Tanner Benjamin.

What time was it?

He strained down to look at his watch. Dumbfounded. He told himself he must be hallucinating. All of it. He looked up. He looked out the passenger window. He looked over at the psychopathic woman who sat behind the wheel of the car. She seemed as stern, as impenetrable as an iron case. Could it be true? Could it?

Could all of this really have transpired in only. Forty. Five. Minutes.

Bugs jumped up and splattered on the windshield in the American night.

"Here is where we are going Tanner. Hope you like."

Up ahead, in the distance, set on the side of the road like a location from some cheap movie, the Roadside Café was lit civilization, and surrounded by hillbilly getaway cars. And a few cop cars. And he still had some blood on his palms.

But by this time he was beyond thinking of himself as anything but a hostage.

"Yeah. I guess that's okay. What could happen?"

"You could eat."

"I could also puke."

But surprisingly, he did eat.

She pulled in much too quickly, squealing tires, and must

have brought not a few heads up to peer out the long diner window. She turned off the car. This bitch seemed to be daring someone to hassle her.

Tanner got out on shaky legs, saying nothing. He noticed, immediately, that there was a Volkswagen bug parked where there shouldn't have been. Hillbilly's, as far as he knew, never drove Volkswagen bugs.

Through the door. Into the dining room. No wait to be seated. Just sit. Smoking section. The fluorescent lights hurt his eyes, making him wince. He imagined he looked as if he just spent the last three days smoking crack.

They sat. A very tired waitress approached a moment later. She had tremendous dark circles under her eyes. She automatically placed two empty mugs and a pot of coffee in front of them and got out her little pad.

"Help y'all?"

He looked at the menu. It might as well have been written in Chinese.

"Um yeah, I will have steak and eggs. And my friend here will have...what will you have, friend?"

She looked at him expectantly.

"Steak. And eggs. Over easy."

His voice was a little pip.

She looked up at the waitress, handed her the menu, and said, "he's tired, is all."

The woman heaved a gusty sigh, and said, "ain't we all, hon. It's been a long night."

The woman walked away quickly. Tanner scanned the smoking section, trying to avoid looking at Sabrina.

It was a typical Saturday night at the Roadside. Big beards. Loud drunks. Several scantily clad barmaids drying out with their grubby, macho bonehead daddy's. And five people that did not belong in the picture at all.

In the booth across the aisle from them, a large woman with a Civil War-era cap puffed an immense curled carven pipe of

antique origins. Next to her sat a pallid, lanky young man with a fishing cap and a scruffy beard. His hair was pulled into two pony-tail strands. He was much too “tree-hugger” to be smoking his little wooden pipe in this dive.

They both seemed to be busily grilling a third party seated across from them. A little weasel of a fellow with a sock cap. Short, stocky, smoking one right after the other. They seemed like they had him under arrest.

Tanner could only catch brief hints of the conversation, but it all seemed to revolve around ghosts. Or flying saucers. Or whether or not the little man was “crazy”, “doing something dangerous”, Or whether or not “Jack Cards” had something to do with something.

“Tanner,” Sabrina leaned over the table, exposing quite a bit of her braless bust, and whispered. “That guy looks just like you.”

Tanner considered.

“Not a chance,” he said. What the hell. He had some pride left.

The other two people had come in just after them. A short, frazzled-looking woman that looked as if she had hurriedly thrown on her outfit and make-up. She was walking with a purposeful strut in front of a much older man, who looked, for all the world, like the portraits of the famous Rhode Island horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. Mixed with a dash of Jimmy Stewart, and a smidge of a young Don Knotts. The man seemed like he had just about spent all of his energy already that evening. Tanner knew, exactly, how he felt.

Suddenly, he realized who it was. Milt Seebaum. His favorite college professor. What in the hell was he doing here at this hour? And with her?

Before he knew it Tanner was already up, and moving slowly toward his old Prof, in a kind of half-sleepy disbelief.

“Professor? Professor Seebaum?”

The couple had seated themselves at a little table in the corner. The man stiffened, and turned around slowly. Sure enough, it was old Milty. His face seemed to lose all blood.

“Uh...hey, there, um. Mr...I can't seem to.”

Milt fumbled for some words, eager to brush him off. Tanner looked in his eyes, saw they were bloodshot, and wondered what the hell Milt Seebaum of all people was doing out on a Saturday night drunk with some young broad. Or some younger broad, at any rate.

“Tanner, sir. Tanner Benjamin. I was in your two oh one class. Remember? I'll never forget that class, sir. Great class.”

Milt Seebaum fumbled for a bit more than said, “Oh, oh yes. Mr. Benjamin, I believe. A good student, you were. Always punctual.”

He looked at Tanner with a face that said he was desperately trying to think of something else to say. Tanner turned and started to walk away, when the woman that was with Seebaum suddenly chirped up and said, “Why don't you invite your girlfriend over and sit with us. Looks like we're both here for the same reason.”

The resultant meal was an amalgam of the bizarre, surreal, and the ferociously mundane. It was strikingly, brutally comic, and in it's intense nothingness it shocked Tanner into a new sense of the highly absurd and grotesque.

“Um, so are uh, I don't think we have been introduced...”

“Sabrina. Sabrina Sabrina.”

“Sorry...didn't catch that last name.”

“Uh, *Sabrina*.”

Munch. Chomp. Cough.

“Um Tanner, so what have you been doing with yourself lately? Any luck kick-starting the old writing career?”

“Well, to be perfectly honest Prof, not much. I've been scribbling a few things here and there. Mostly poetry.”

Slurp. Chew. Cough.

"Poetry does not pay the bills, young man."

"I know...but what else do we have?"

"So are you two, an *item*?"

Pat Ireland seemed the most hopeful party sitting at the table.

"Well...you could say that we are old friends, really."

"Really? And what did *you* major in Sabrina?"

Silence.

"Well, it is getting late, Pat...maybe we had better leave these two kids to do their thing...go home, get some sleep."

Milt Seebaum looked as if he was on the verge of a minor case of exhaustion. His skin looked as if it might be glossing over with a fresh coat of some thin, gray paint that was lurking just beneath his pores. He looked like he had been left out in the cold for two evenings running.

"No...really, you guys the night is young. Hey, does anyone want to go check out a haunted house? I know of a great place just out in the country a piece."

"A piece? A piece of what?"

Pat Ireland turned toward Milt Seebaum and smiled the patient, tolerant smile of a patient, tolerant bourgeois liberal intellectual.

"Colloquialism, Milt...sometimes I think you live on another planet."

Tanner was nearly about to keel over, but realized, once again with a sort of dawning horror that all that was standing between him and collapse, that he was, in fact, still a hostage.

"A haunted house? Sabrina, you didn't mention anything about a haunted house."

"Yes I did. Don't you remember? I told you all about that crazy old family that was killed by the father all those years ago...I told you, on the way here, you snapper head!"

Pat and Milt looked at each other with a kind of vague bemusement, as if to say, *love is blind, and dumb, and deaf too, apparently.*

“Yes, well, it’s good to see that you’re alive and kicking Tanner...I must confess, out of all the students I have had in maybe the last five years, you alone seemed to always stand just a little above the rest. In effort, in ability. Please, take advantage of the talents you’ve been granted.”

And this from a guy that couldn’t remember me twenty minutes ago, Tanner thought bitterly, but let it slide. He had bigger things on his mind at the moment.

“So...about the haunted house?”

Milt Seebaum started to reply, more forcefully, that he was going home, but was cut short by Pat. Pat, who had just let him sink his grizzled old tube steak between her plump little thighs, now apparently, had him by the psychological balls. She said, “Well, why not Milt? You said you needed some fun on Saturday night.”

“I...uh, that is, poking around some old place, in the middle of the night, does not sound like it would be much fun for me, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, come on, live a little...it’s what you need, Milty, you old fussy man.”

Already, Pat Ireland knows exactly what I need. I’m ruined.

But he couldn’t see any way out of it.

“Okay,” he sighed. “Let’s go see your house, and you can tell us all about it on the way there.”

Milt Seebaum spoke with the patient, tolerant tone of a father trying to console an idiot child. Sabrina looked as if she had just been handed a lollipop. Tanner sighed inwardly, filled with an apprehension not inconsistent with the events of the evening. Pat Ireland thought that a drive through the country might be fun.

You could not have asked for a more picturesque, beautiful night. Do you know what I mean when I say the sky looked as if it had been created for young lovers? Every star a beautiful pin-point of

wonder against a curtain of deep black velvet. And Venus, that ascending master of the sky burned with the mystic fire that named it in the beginning, when the ancients where cataloging the heavens.

They were piled in Sabrina's car, Sabrina's idea, and Pat Ireland had thought that that was just fine. The two men blanched, but what could they do? It was the Season of the Witch.

Vroom. Vroom. Rattle. Bang.

Bug splatter of the night, bug guts on the windshield, not a cop in sight.

Where were all the cops, thought Tanner. *In the donut shops?*

It was hell bent for leather, and Sabrina swung the car around each turn wildly. The two older passengers began to regret, slightly, that they had not taken Pat's car. Pat's little VW bug. Pat's wheels were safety. Sabrina's wheels meant they might each end up in traction for six months, if not worse.

Farm fields as far as the eye could see. *Indiana is desolation,* thought Tanner. *Indiana is row after row of rotting barns and decrepit farmhouses. And in the midst of all this, the Breadbasket of America.*

What time is it?, Tanner thought madly. *What the hell time is it?*

But his trusty wrist watch had quit working.

"Professor Seebaum?"

"Uh, I think we can dispense with the formalities tonight Tanner...just plain old Milt will do."

"Okay...Milt, do you know what time it is?"

Milt Seebaum had a very nice digital watch worth about five dollars. It glowed in the dark.

"It says half past one."

Tanner could tell that neither of them could believe that.

Suddenly, with a screech of tires they were all thrown to the side, causing not a few groans and the first profanity that Tanner Benjamin had ever heard Milt Seebaum utter since he had known him.

Screech!

They were thrown forward as the car came to a violent halt in the weed-choked front yard of a dilapidated house that had not, it could be assumed, seen occupants in several decades. It sat like some ancient monolith of a bygone era, illuminated in the harsh moonlight. It brooded.

“Well...here we are.”

It sat far back of the road, surrounded by a ring of trees that looked as equally dismal, and forlorn. An ancient tire swing still swayed gently in the breeze, perhaps remembering the jovial buttock of some young whipper snapper that was now old, or dead. They got out slowly.

“Wow,” said the ever-tolerant Pat. “So you say this place is really haunted, huh?”

“Sure is...there was a family back her in the fifties. They were a part of some strange religious group. I think they were called the Crabbites. Well, anyway, the father found out his wife was having an affair. He was really crazy, thought that God talked to him...use to speak in other voices. They had some other people living here with them, I think some cult members or something. Anyway, yeah he killed his wife and child, a little girl. Then, when the others found out...they all committed suicide. Some by knife, some by poison, some by rope.”

“Oh, how horrible...” Pat Ireland said the last word with the emphasis she usually reserved for moments when it was appropriate to think that some item that had just been related to her was, truly, tragic. In truth, she was more fascinated than anything.

The two women started toward the rickety porch. The windows, long broken, boarded-up, and otherwise really did seem, for an infernal moment, as if they were terrifying eyes spying the entrance of some foul intruders into their silent, vigilant domain.

“Pat, I don’t know if it’s a good idea to climb up on that porch...I mean, what if you fall through? Hospital’s miles away.”

“Oh, Milt, you old grandma, where’s your sense of adventure?”

Climb they did, and in a few minutes, with the aid of a flashlight that Tanner had no idea Sabrina had brought along with her, the men warily followed the women through the door.

The smell of feter and age was so overpowering and sickening, at first Tanner found it quite hard to accommodate himself. It was one noxious blast, and the accumulated dust of years made breathing labored. From the few glimpses the men got of the place from the flashlight beam, they could see that the furniture, from whatever period it had last been occupied, still remained; a grotesque and declining reminder that, once, this place had been habitable.

Sabrina rattled on non-stop, but Tanner paid little attention to her barrage of inanities. At least, Prof Ireland thought her to be interesting, and the two women rather followed each other further back into the darkness, chattering between themselves.

At his shoulder, in almost the decrepit doorway, stood Milt, breathing heavily, exasperated and totally spent. The alcohol he had smelled earlier was, probably, almost oxygenated by now.

“Door was probably locked...she must have come here earlier and forced it. You know, this is trespassing. If we get caught, there will be a stink. I don’t think Pat has thought of that. Uh, Tanner, can you do something with your girlfriend? Get us all back safe?”

“She’s... not my girlfriend, Milt. Tell you the truth, I’m not sure just what the hell she is.”

“How long have you known her?”

Tanner considered.

“Well, I’m not exactly sure at this point, Prof. But, I would guess, oh, about three hours now.”

Milt Seebaum choked. He didn’t want an explanation. Forty minutes later he had one, and it was not what he expected at all.

In the moonlit glow the place was, indeed, sepulchral. A Poe could not have conjured such living ghastliness. Tanner didn’t want to take more than a few steps away from the door, where

Milt Seebaum cowered impatiently, ready for the cool comfort of his rumpled bed sheets, the softness of his pillows, the safety of his little hobbit-like hole. His books. His color TV. PBS. Warm milk. A full pipe. His classical CD collection.

“This has got to stop, soon.”

Tanner heard him mumble under his breath.

Bruce pulled into the parking lot of Jokers Wild, a local strip-delicatessen. It was Saturday night, and he knew his favorite girl would be here, shaking her tits for a bunch of horny old men that couldn't stand looking at their wives naked after so many miserable years.

He finished off the last of his third beer behind the wheel, leaned over, reached into the glove box, and pulled out a nine millimeter pistol. He made sure it was loaded, got out, locked his truck, and strutted inside.

He was a big man, was Bruce McGonagill, and this was a rough place. And tonight, of all nights, was roughest. But he knew he could handle himself.

Just in case, though, he wanted some back-up. That's what the gun was for. If he found himself surrounded in the parking lot, or some group of black hoods tried to stop him as he drove through what amounted to the ghetto, he wanted to know he could reach in his glove box, and take out Mr. Safety.

Otherwise, he would beat the holy hell out of any man that wanted to merely *brawl*.

He walked though the dark wooden door, looked over at the bouncer, and noticed all his front teeth were missing. His kind of place.

He handed him five bucks, mumbled something, and as soon as naked flesh hit his eye he knew that he had made a wise decision in coming here. This was it. This was the center of male dominance. Naked women on display, to be treated like the sides of meat that they were.

He grinned. A lovely little thing in a g-string and pasties jiggled up to him and asked him if he would tip her.

“Sure thing, hon,” he said, and reached for his wallet.

He made sure to slide the bill down the v of her crotch as far as physics would allow his fingers to go. She didn’t bat an eyelash, but leaned over and pecked him on the cheek.

“Thanks.”

He strode up to the bar. A woman that looked like Mrs. Captain Kidd was handing out beers in a can. No glasses. No glasses at all.

“I’ll have a Bud.” Bud was a man’s beer.

She handed him over his beer, and he turned. A couple of short trolls were busy with a pool game. He wondered why anyone would come to a titty bar to play pool. He walked out to the stage.

A very young, long-legged woman was gyrating around a pole. Nothing new there, but he sat down anyway, put his beer on the counter, and leaned over. She crawled across to him, swaying, her tiny breasts pleasant. Inviting. Enticing.

“Hey, I’ve seen you around here before.”

The pounding music made conversation impossible, a series of droning yells.

She looked young enough to be his daughter. He liked that.

“Yeah...how much for a lap dance?”

“Ten dollars. Here, tip me.”

She thrust her pelvis in his face.

He dropped five bucks. Later he would drop over a hundred. Still later, he would hand over pretty much the contents of his entire wallet for the month.

Dad would be proud.

They had been upstairs for a very long time. Tanner and Milt had simply waited out on the rickety front porch, careful lest they should snag their clothes on a rusted nail.

“What do you think they’re doing? Do you think we should

go up and get them?

"I dunno. Do you want to risk it? We don't have a flash light. I only have a lighter."

"Damn it, I thought Pat was smarter than this."

He reached up and rubbed his sagging face.

"Oh, I am so tired Tanner. I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I rather wish we hadn't run into either one of you this evening. Pat seems like the type that, if she has proper encouragement, can be convinced to stay on the straight and narrow. But, alas, my experience with women is sorely lacking."

"Milt...you and me both. I don't know exactly what is happening tonight, but I wish I hadn't called in. Called in."

He said it again, suddenly, as if just realizing that he was now, most certainly, unemployed.

He felt like screaming: at himself, at Sabrina, the Devil Woman, at Milt Seebaum and his stupid, frumpy lover. And at the cicada chirp of a mid western midnight.

Gary was sweating bullets. Really sweating bullets. He wasn't use to being dish-bitch, and he didn't like it. It made him look inferior in front of his own employees. If that was possible.

Behind him, a thoroughly tattooed lummoX led the not-so-merry crew in another, ceaseless round of orders. The heat was a little breathtaking.

"We need two enchiladas, a super, a side of rounds, here's some more shit...some more shit...and some more shit. By god, I'll be a happy mother fucker when we close this bitch down tonight."

He handed out little slips of paper to various cooking stations. Waitresses in very tight white shorts began bringing back bus tubs full of sickening, filthy dishes. Outside, the voices of the crowd had risen to a general, ear-splitting roar.

"Gary, we are really getting backed-up up front. There's no more room to put anything used."

“I know, darlin’. I’m working as fast as I can.”

In truth, he was. But the damn washer kept getting backed-up somehow. It had to be pestered with, the filter had to be dug out. Clots of half-chewed food held between his fingers. And every bit of it looked like a round, pugnacious, well-beaten Tanner Benjamin.

I’m gonna kill that little fuck. I’m gonna kill him when I see him. Tanner Benjamin, your ass is grass.

He slammed the lid of the washer down, heard the satisfying sound of the sprayer putter into action.

Outside, University Avenue was already a mass of young bodies. Crowds: hanging out on the porch area, trudging down the sidewalks, loitering in front of the coffee shop. It was a hot, happy, drunk evening. It was loud.

Cars blasting ghetto rap. Young guys on the prowl. For booze, for sex, for fun. People chewed sandwiches, doffed beers, smoked cigarettes. It was typically a Saturday night in this rowdy, party college town. Lower-living wasn’t simply tolerated tonight, it was encouraged. It was mandatory.

It was all about drinking yourself into the newest stupor. Did you care where you woke up the next day? Or with who? You paid, your body paid, but it made Monday classes seem so much more tolerable.

It was all loud. It was all life. It was right now, and here he was, doomed to work well past his typical shift, closing down a filthy place and ensuring he would be too wrecked, and it would be far too late (by about two hours) to really enjoy any of the campus festivities. He kept moving.

Bus tub. Empty. Dish rack. Spray. Close. Cycle. Open. Put away.

Go get another. He had it down now to a fine science. But, even as fast as he was moving, he still couldn’t keep up. The waitresses were forced to bring quite a lot of them back too him.

Tanner! You shit! You stinking little shit.

What the hell time was it? It had to be close to closing the

grill down.

The two women finally emerged from the darkness, rattling the floorboards.

Milt Seebaum turned around slowly, disgustedly, exhaustedly. Patricia Ireland was staggering, her eyes red. The smell of fresh marijuana smoke followed the women outside.

Milt finally had nothing to say. He was shocked into a new awareness. Patricia Ireland, for her part, could do little but stumble recklessly in the front yard, and giggle. It had been a few years since she had last tasted the liquid sweet smoke of strong marijuana, and the effect was exhilarating. At this particular moment in time, Patricia Ireland found Sabrina to be, well, one cool chick.

“Pat...I didn’t come out with you tonight so you could smoke grass, and giggle like you were sixteen.”

“Milt, man...you sure got a *long* nose...man...”

Patricia Ireland could say little else that was coherent, and every incoherent statement was punctuated with the same ridiculous giggle.

Milt finally lost it. In the inimitably restrained fashion of the world-wide Milt Seebaums, he allowed his usual, carefully-controlled tones to rise to a sort of desperate, dying shriek.

“Miss...miss...I hope you are aware that we are not going to let you drive home in this condition! Miss...miss...I want you to relinquish your keys to me, and I will attempt to get us back home tonight. Miss! Sabrina!”

Sabrina was as oblivious to him as if he had been transported in from some strange dream. She began to dance: erotic bucking of the hips, posturing of a veteran go-go juggler. She must have been listening to her own, internal, sacred music.

She suddenly raised her little gun, and fired into the air. Milt Seebaum looked, suddenly, as if his bladder might pop. He gasped, backed toward the car slowly. Tanner backed with him,

turned his head wearily, worriedly, and stated flatly:

“I wouldn’t say anything about it, sir. She’s killed two men already tonight.”

The car shot the line all the way back into town, but at least the lights of the city gave a kind of reassurance to the whole scene: it was possible that this whole, macabre night might, finally, come to an end.

Milt Seebaum looked as if he might weep. Pressed up next to him, her not inconsiderable breasts pressing against his stomach, Patricia was leaning in a sort of half-crouched mode.

“Milt...milt...”

Child-like voice. Paranoia.

He tried to ignore her. He looked stolidly ahead, certain that he was being punished for his indiscretion. This was God, that was it. The Milts of the world were expected to remain within a certain parameter of expected, acceptable behavior. Anything more was flagrant violation of holy writ.

And so, he would die. He was comfortable with this. After all, what did life amount to, after one had attained a certain state of being, of mental harmony, and had published all the papers that one was capable of writing in one’s chosen field of academic endeavor? So. Fate was unkind; cruel, unfair. It had been good to him for many decades.

Sooner or later, everybody laid down the final, losing hand. Game over.

“Milt...”

Imploring. Needy. Childish bitch, he could have batted her on top of her sandy brown hair. Instead:

“For God’s sake, Patricia, what?”

“Do you like me?”

“Yes. I like you.”

Sabrina looked in the rear-view mirror.

“Hey Milt, old boy...you aren’t being mean to my new friend are you?”

Sabrina said these words as if she was dragging the syllables

through cotton candy and black dialect. Tanner simply stared, aghast, out the passenger side window, remembering what the fat man looked like as he had grasped, in his death agonies, the refrigerator door handle. He wondered, again, what prison life was like.

“Where are we going, Sabrina?”

Tanner’s voice had a slight tremulous quality to it, mixed with the sort of caution that one takes with a very powerfully built, mentally challenged adult who was prone to violent, misguided upset.

“To my favorite bar Tanner. It’s Saturday night, buddy, we’re gonna live it up. Tanner is the strangest name. Who named you?”

“What...what’s your favorite bar?”

“Beowulf’s. You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Hm, that’s not the right answer, baby. You better give me the right answer, or, you know...pow!”

She said the last word with mocking relish, quieter and quieter, finally just moving her lips and giggling.

From the backseat, another spasm of Patricia Ireland laughter. Milt wondered if he might be able to reach up and over and secure the pistol, left lazily, precariously, in the lap of the driver. Then he thought better of it. He would wait; they would go to the bar, and he would call the police. If he made a move now, even if he didn’t get shot, she might wreck. Kill them all anyway (and she seemed to be trying damn hard to have an accident as it was.) No. Discretion was the better part of valor.

Bruce McGonagill was seated on a plush white couch at the edge of the stage. On his lap, a lusty young woman gyrated acrobatically, making sure to excite him with the prospect of exploring her talents further in more subdued, private quarters.

“Oh yeah...oh mamma, lemme feel them tits.”

(Touching of the performer, for all of those unacquainted with proper strip-club etiquette, is expressly forbidden. Although it is okay, theoretically, during the course of a lap dance, for certain acts that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate contact to transpire. Such as grabbing the twin globes of flesh sitting on your lap. Or, having the oftentimes surgically-augmented mammary glands of said dancer thrust into your face, and across your cheeks. And, of course, the grinding of crotches is what the entire act is all about.)

Bruce had a tremendous, massive erection brewing; a maddening tension that was impossible for him to master, and always had been. It was going to have to be conquest. There was no other solution. It was bare instinct that drove Bruce McGonagill from one seamy situation in life to another, and he would be damned if it was going to be any different now.

Over near the bar, a trio of very large bouncers played a sort of ballerina-shuffle with an intoxicated gent who had forgot himself. Punches were thrown. Profanity was yelled. Breasts continued to jiggle and sway.

It was like Bruce McGonagill had died and gone to that great candy store in the sky.

He grunted. He sighed. He moaned. His breathing was as ragged as a ripped dishcloth. He wanted to rip the thong out from between her legs and take her in the strange, savage fashion of primal beasts in the sub-Saharan jungle. He was man. He was meat. Let him roar.

Instead, he moaned, "How much? How much baby? I know you go on dates."

She stopped her contortions for a moment, and considered. Last week she had made buku bucks going down on a heavy-set, smelly trucker that was missing teeth. That had not been fun.

But this guy was handsome. Rugged, tough, certainly an ex-con and probably free with his fists with whatever bitch dared to

cross him when he was drinking. But he was also hunky. Big time hunky.

Her business sense perked up.

“It depends...what are you willing to spend, big boy?”

He didn’t answer for a second, and so, as a means of convincing him she managed to straddle his face with her pelvis. He breathed in deeply. He could smell her; her sweat, her sex. It smelled like heaven. It was a perfume musk specifically calculated to drive men like Bruce McGonagill over the edge.

“Anything...anything you want baby. When?”

She smiled. She had an arrangement with the boss.

“Now, if you want. Where?”

“Not my place...”

“Oh. Old lady?”

She already knew the answer.

“She can’t do for you can she, big boy? Not the way I can. Let’s get a hotel room.”

Jill Lavender sat in her parked car, at the edge of a darkened, dangerous lot, and watched her boyfriend emerge. On his arm, some little slut in a mini-skirt with blond hair. They got into his truck.

Son of a bitch is way too drunk to drive. Let’s see how far he gets before him and that whore get pulled over.

She had been sitting here for what seemed an interminable amount of time. It was not her idea of a happy Saturday night. And it was damn frightening, too. This particular desolate area of town had the distinction of being known as the “combat zone”. A few weeks ago, a tragic, dope addled young woman named Jane Doe had been found stabbed and left in a dumpster. Her killer had been the infamous Perpetrator Unknown.

It was getting routine for the SWAT team to be called to the nearby housing projects. How do we say it? It wasn’t anywhere near Sesame Street.

She waited until he ambled his rusted monster out of the parking lot, careful to the curb, making sure to use his turn signal.

Oh, he's going to be extra-careful now. He's got a hot piece of merchandise he just paid for. Bastard. I'll kill him when I get my hands on him. I'll literally fucking kill him. Well, here goes.

She turned the key in the ignition, and her old, battered station wagon roared to unsteady life. She had been right. He was far too preoccupied to even notice her slouched down in the driver's seat, parked fifteen feet away from him.

Brain in his prick. Liquor for courage. No money this month.

She promised herself she would kill him. She was a woman of her word.

She slowly pulled out of the strip-club parking lot, and followed them out under the train-trestle to the rest of the wee morning hours.

They had come to a screeching halt in front of Beowulf's, which was dank, and dark, and had a combined smell of spilt beer, tobacco, pizza cheese, and unwashed hippy. It boasted a *faux* medieval décor including wall-mounted swords, shields, long drinking tables, and a fireplace. It was like a tavern set-aside for fantasy role players to drown their dateless sorrows at.

Sabrina looked at Milt in the rear-view mirror. Suddenly, she seemed to be stone cold sober, as if her buzz had been some sort of dramatic put-on. She seemed as lucid, as psychotic as Jack the Ripper must have been when he cut the uterus from his fifth victim. Her eyes were like the steely tip of a hastily drawn dagger.

"Don't get any ideas, man. If you even try to get away from us, or call the cops, or what have you, I'll kill Patricia. You got that? You can't protect her. Got that? Got that?"

"Yeah...I got that."

"Tanner, same goes for you. We're going to have fun tonight. A lot of *fun*..."

They exited the car. Patricia, apparently having dozed off under the combined weight of alcohol, sex, haunted house exploration, and much marijuana, had to be roused to waking.

“Wh-wha-wha?”

“We’re going now Patricia. Get up.”

“Are we home?”

“Not exactly.”

Downtown. Sometime in the wee hours of Sunday morning, before last call became the grim reminder that bar-hopping had to end sometime. Four people. One of them, a highly psychotic young multiple murderess, holding each of them, for all intents and purposes, hostage. To drink. To have “fun”.

Tanner Benjamin could not believe the luck he had been blessed with.

Part 2

Eight

What we have not made clear in the preceding narrative was a peculiar series of events that led up to the tragedy that was the cornerstone of the national headlines. What happened was terrible enough, but can anyone doubt that the fact that some one as young as little Lindsey Lavender was involved made it all the more ironic, and horrifying?

Lindsey had been sleeping peacefully, innocently; her dreams a reflection of the distortions of the day. In her dreams she was often accompanied by a friendly Dwarf she thought of affectionately as Skimmy. Skimmy was little, cute, and had a wagging dwarf beard. Skimmy could walk through walls, talk to

animals, and do all sorts of things that real dwarfs obviously cannot. So let's establish the fact, from the get-go, that Skimmy is not some form of supernatural intervention.

Jill Lavender was pacing furiously downstairs, making more racket than she, apparently, had intended to. She was waiting desperately for the sitter, and the sitter was taking her time. She walked into the kitchen to noisily crash dishes around in the sink, all the better to make the unwashed dishes seem like a smaller, tidier pile.

Clutter. Crash. Bang.

Lindsey Lavender was suddenly jolted awake from a very promising dream involving a man in a blue Dalmatian suit with a little blue Dalmatian cap, and a large, blue-spotted Dalmatian. It was a furious rip from the land of dreams, and incoming to, she realized that she now was not going to be able to go back to sleep anytime soon.

(In such moments of sheer aloneness, the imaginative faculties of children oftentimes are able to conjure certain imaginary companions to help them cope, and give them comfort. Lindsey Lavender, as we mentioned before, had just such a companion, Skimmy the Wonder Dwarf. She looked out at the darkness of her room, felt the aloneness of her young life, rolled over on one arm, and conjured Skimmy in the way that only little children and the schizophrenic are capable of.)

"Skimmy? Skimmy, are you there?"

A hunched little shape seemed to creep up from the swirling shadows of the carpet.

"Hey there Lindsey. Long time no see. Have any cookies for me?"

Lindsey frowned.

"No, Skimmy. I'm sorry. Mommy forgot to go to the store."

Skimmy huffed, and Skimmy puffed, and Skimmy did a little angry spin and stamped one foot.

"You mean the bitch forgot our cookies again! Damnit,

now I'm going to have to creep up on her and steal her breath when she sleeps."

"No!" Lindsey hissed sharply. "She's my mommy Skimmy. You can't steal her breath. She...just forgets things sometimes."

Skimmy's face suddenly grew very grave.

"I bet I know who made her forget. It was him, wasn't it? He did it to her. She was good mommy before she met him, wasn't she Lindsey?"

Lindsey nodded, and then she began to weep.

"Oh, hey there Lindsey, no need to cry. We can fix him. It's no big deal. I'll creep up on him when he's drunk, or stoned, or just too lazy to wake up and work. And when I do, I'll take this short sword here, and I'll shave off his moustache. He'd look pretty stupid without that moustache, wouldn't he Lindsey? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And Lindsey began to laugh a little, and agreed that, in fact, Bruce would look pretty stupid without his moustache.

Skimmy bent over close to her. His breath smelled remarkably like rotten meat. Lindsey didn't like it. She wrinkled her nose and coughed, but Skimmy said, "Sorry. I just got done eating a dead cat. Tell me, Lindsey, how would you like to help me play a little trick on Mommy?"

Lindsey thought that that sounded neat. Lindsey thought that that sounded a darn sight better than just going to sleep and waking up to the same loneliness and boredom that Sunday always promised.

Skimmy said he would be right beside her all the way. Skimmy told her to get a couple of dolls and make the bed up like she was still sleeping in it. Skimmy said that when Ronnie came upstairs to check and make sure she was asleep, she would think that Lindsey was still laying there. Skimmy said he would meet her downstairs, and that she should sneak out and hide in mommy's car. Skimmy said Mommy would think that was funny.

"I'll meet you in the backseat. Remember, you have to scrunch down in the back behind mommy's seat, so she doesn't

know you are there. But I'll be with you, and I'll know. Okay? See ya downstairs!"

Skimmy quickly turned, walked to the window, snapped his fingers, and disappeared in a funny little sparkle. It looked like the sort of sparkle Santa Clause might make when he was coming down the chimney.

Lindsey slowly got up, rubbed her eyes, and looked out in the gloom. More quickly, she went to the closet and began to paw through her doll collection. Bruce and another one of mommy's boyfriends had actually bought her some here and there, to try and get in good with mommy, and some of her dolls were pretty decent. She selected the one with the blondest hair, took it over to her bed, and with the aid of a pillow and some careful organization, just managed to get everything looking right enough. Then she crept to the door, and cracked it open. She could here mommy downstairs, still rattling dishes.

She had to time this right, did Lindsey Lavender. She couldn't let mommy see her sneak out.

But she wasn't too worried.

She knew Skimmy would help things out.

The table looked like it was drowning in suicidal refuse. It was a health nut's worst nightmare: overflowing ashtrays, empty beer bottles, half an eaten pizza. Assembled were a strange mixture of friends and complete strangers. But nobody was a stranger at Beowulf's.

Drink. Drank. Drink. Drunk.

And Sabrina paid for all of it with the help of a stolen credit card. Tanner's head was bigger than a basket ball. It was amazing that his liver hadn't decided to crawl out of his body and beg for mercy. He wasn't even walking on the ground anymore. He was floating.

Patricia Ireland had managed to become surrounded by a group of older grizzled biker-types, and was busily telling them, in confab style, the details of her so-absorbing existence. Milt

Seebaum had quietly turned a whiter shade of pale, and had put his head down at the long table, the sleeve of his expensive jacket soaking in a long trickle of spilt beer. Bodies came, went, sat down, got up, made unintelligible conversation and blew away like chaff in the social wind.

Every once in awhile he would poke his head up and take a massive swig of beer. He had been through three very dark, strong beers already. And he wondered, in his inebriated state, if it might not be a good idea to just get stoned later for old times sake.

Upon entering, he had stayed very close to Tanner, feeling the camaraderie in both being hostage to the whims of a gun-toting psychopath and not, really, knowing what to do about it.

The most perplexing exchange happened when the had both taken their seats at the top of the hour. Hour? What hour, exactly it was, could not be established.

“Tanner...Tanner, what time it?”

Tanner considered. Here was the same difficulty that he had run into earlier, that he had dismissed as a result of simple shock. Now, it had reared it's ugly head between them, and demanded to be dealt with.

“I don't know Professor...my watch stopped hours ago.”

He suddenly looked very grim. Or, at least, a much greater form of grim than could have been attributed to him before the odd revelation concerning the enigmatic flow of the evening's chronology.

“So has mine apparently. I asked someone a minute ago, in the men's room. Tanner...”

He trailed off. He looked over at the bar. No clock. Amazing. How could there be no clock?

“It must just be my imagination. Maybe I'm going crazy.”

“No. No sir, you're not.”

“Tanner...Am I fucking dreaming this?”

Tanner's mouth fell open in shock. He had never heard Milt Seebaum use the F-word before.

Alcohol flowed. Tears flowed. “Flow my tears”, the policeman said, and then departed because even an off-duty cop really didn’t deserve to be hanging out in a place as retro-cool as Beowulf’s. It was not a prescription for promotion.

A limbless drunk was stationed at a nearly-empty corner of the table, bent over, bawling. It was Tanner Benjamin. Sabrina, who had been busily working the hanging-meat market of worthless men, all standing with their eager groins pressing tight against their faded denim jeans, spied his meager, beaten frame out of the corner of her eye. She did an abrupt about-face, and left Peter Davenport rather more than disappointed, standing like a massive oak in the middle of the bar aisle surrounded by his buds, who must have realized the irony in having the girl he was trying to score with brush him off in favor of a weeping shorty.

Nonplussed, he tried to make it look cool. He sauntered over to the long table. He would try to put on his Mr. Goodbuddy face, the face that sometimes got the chicks. He heard the asshole Sean Patterson say “Yeah, look at him go. I’m betting on the crying guy.”

That was okay. They were both on the football team. Well, Sean just might get his ass kicked in the locker room come next practice. Just might, if he didn’t keep his mouth shut from now on.

“Hey...everything all right over here?”

He smiled. He had a big, broad smile roughly the equivalent of Richard Kiels “Jaws” character in the *James Bond* movies. He thought himself quite the dish.

It was across the bridge, closer to campus. The house was very old, and packed to maximum capacity. Music (not very good music, we might add) rumbled softly from within the walls. Several people sat out on the front porch, smoking and drinking. They were an odd assortment of young men and women. Very

hip. So.

Every once in a while the front door would open, and someone would stumble out. Every once in awhile somebody or a group of somebody's would amble up the sidewalk and stumble in. It was a continual flow of traffic in and out.

This was a band house. And that meant party house.

"Yeah...I'm fucking rock and roll."

Biff Speedo (as he was officially dubbed that evening) sat on the couch next to Laura Larue. The small, busted coffee table in front of them was completely covered in alcohol bottles, ashtrays, food wrappers, CD covers, and what-have-yous. Around them, in an increasingly mesmerizing combination, people came and went and stood and smoked and walked in and stood in little groups and danced in their own pathetic way. Most of these people took it for granted that the main objective in life was to be thought of as tragically, pathetically cool.

Biff had managed to poke a safety pin through the piercing in his left ear. He had drank an estimated twenty bears, and had some very cheap, disgusting wine.

"Hey, does anyone have any cough syrup?"

The skinny blond jerk came through the kitchen door, looked down at him, and then handed him a bottle of Dimetapp Elixir.

"Does this shit have codeine in it?"

"I guess."

"Are you lying?"

"I dunno."

The skinny blond jerk picked up his battered guitar, strummed a few chords. The living room began to empty out only slightly.

The smattering of conversations was confusing, but continually punctuated with the epithet *like*. The all-encompassing expression. The word for every occasion. The word for all times, and all crimes.

Biff Speedo opened up the Dimetapp, thought better of it,

and then set it down on the coffee table where it was perched precariously next to several empty beers and a phlegm wad.

"I am, like, *so fruckin' drunk, maaan. So fruckin...*"

"Shut up."

"Hey, what the fuck was up with that little bitch at the show? Was she, like, on some kind of fucking, I dunno...was that bitch ragging?"

Laura Larue, otherwise known as Danielle, sort of rotated her prodigious posteriors to the side, and cut secret wind. Danielle Laura Larue was attractive in the way an overgrown alterna-girl teenager can be. Her hair was a fire-engine red that would have caused much surprise and consternation a decade ago.

"Fuck if I know, she just comes up to me all of a sudden and she's like 'your boyfriend and his band mates are a bunch of fucking dickheads', and I'm like 'bitch, step back before I tear you a new asshole' and then all of a sudden she acts like she's gonna make a move and then I'm on her. Bitch better recognize."

She laughed, took a drink of beer, belched, and put her not inconsiderably meaty thigh on Biff Speedo's skinny leg. She was sitting on him, *oh god*, tonight might be the night.

The skinny blond jerk said, "I hate when that sort of thing happens when we play. It's a real distraction." He bent down and examined his guitar. He was the serious one. Several people walked in, said, in various ways, 'you guys fucking rocked the house tonight man', slapped some hands, and took various positions.

"It sucks the turnout wasn't any bigger. But...we did okay. Well, 'cept for Joey."

"Aw, that shit's not even gonna fly..." Said Joey.

Joey was a very small, exceptionally bucktoothed young man that had quit college to become a successful drummer in a campus bar band. He perpetually carried the same ignorant grin when under the influence of some mind-altering substance, and sulked and said nothing when not.

“Hey. Do you guys get into *Saturn in Retrograde*?”

The skinny blond jerk looked up.

“If you mean that corporate sellout band, hell no.”

There was a thin, pale young flower of maidenhood standing before him. Her regulation bobbed black hair was perfect. Her slender hips looked as delectable as any had seen that night, at the bar or otherwise. Smoke wafted around her pretty form, making a sort of decorative frame. Her tee shirt read: CORPORATE ROCK STILL SUCKS.

Easy mark.

“Hey, I kind of like them, okay. I’m just like a real asshole when I get done with a gig.”

“You’re a real asshole all the time, Lance.”

“Shut up”

Someone said very loudly, “I was swinging the mother fucker like this, and he was screaming, and then I let him go.” This was followed by a very unsteady demonstration of said swinging.

A Puerto Rican national exchange student *cum* bass player plugged a bizarre video game into the cheap-looking television. It alternated flashing colors. A marijuana pipe was produced and passed amongst those willing and eager. It was Saturday night.

The young maiden took a regulation hit, coughed, and wandered out of the room. Biff Speedo turned to his band mate and said, his voice dragging like rubber, “doesn’t she know who we are?”

The pot took effect quite quickly. All of a sudden, the skinny blond jerk felt himself relax. Get into the groove of the moment. Let his mind wander. During these moments, it seemed like magic lights exploded behind his eyes, and he had visions of himself and his band doing their thing. Letting loose. In empty bars across America. In the darkened, dank, density of booze-infused moments, when sweat and coolness and a desire to stay eighteen and poor forever was all that mattered in life. Righteous ones.

He was, however, thirty years old.

A small skinny woman with a hook nose walked in and said, “I just saw Crazy walking down the sidewalk. Apparently he’s dropping by.”

The woman was a university prof. She doubled as the lead singer of *Poison Betty*. At night, sometimes, she crocheted.

“Well I didn’t fucking invite him.”

Sounds seemed warped, warbly, like everything was dragging by at half-speed.

Crazy was the mutually agreed upon moniker of one Kevin Hickman, a veritable vegetable who had refused to quit talking. When under the effect of one of two various psycho-affective medications, he seemed, for a short period, to be somewhat lucid. But, somehow, always touched in a way that any “normal” person could glean after merely seven hours of acquaintance.

He was also a physical mutant; no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t be out of shape. Have you ever in your life met someone like that? Who was naturally gifted with the physique of a bantam-weight boxer?

Kev had had problems his entire life. To begin with, it had started when he was twelve and had sniffed glue with his favorite cousin Ernie. That had been the beginning of a long painful road: special classes, rehab, institutions. Sniffing glue can have a lasting, permanent impact, it would seem, on the psychological faculties of the sniffer. It had had such an impact on Kev.

But he was handsome, in his own way. He managed to get more pussy than a toilet seat, and much of it for a single night. One particular young lady had liked him very well for a time a time and two times, until he told her about the way the television talked to him. The things that it said. What it commanded him to do.

It had been almost a year since he had last set eyes on Tanner Benjamin. No, actually that’s not quite true. Maybe it had only been several months. At any rate, the last time had been real eventful. In fact, it had been in this very house.

He had busily stolen the same girl that Tanner had been chasing for a month. It had been easy, what with his mutant physique and his lack of social graces, he was a born lothario. Tanner had managed to take the whole situation in stride; he knew he didn't want to have to fight Kev. He didn't have any medical coverage.

It had been a night of not inconsiderable alcoholic intake, and Tanner and Kev had hit the town in the loose-cannon fashion of "aw shucks big brother" that Tanner was so used to by now. They had seen a show, the same band that they had seen fifteen other times, and then they had gone back to the *Saturn in Retrograde* house to party with everyone.

It had amounted to Kev stealing Tanner's girl that night. Tanner's girl was an exceptionally cold-hearted attractive young woman with not an ounce of caring whether or not she ripped out Tanner's beady little heart and stepped on it under the heel of one regulation Doc Marten boot. In that respect, she was fairly typical.

Tanner had drank himself into the proverbial stupor, had wandered around the house, much of it cleared out by this point, and had finally been whisked away in the piece-of-shit car owned by Kev back to Kev's place. With the girl. It was all a part of the ritualistic torture of Tanner Benjamin.

The place was a monumentally ancient, decrepit structure that seemed to be beyond the human capability of comprehension. It had roughly the architectural layout of the infamous Winchester Mystery House in California. It had been busted down into student apartments.

Kev, at this time, was attempting to identify himself as a student.

Somewhere, in the drunken vicinity of the brain of Tanner Benjamin, it had not been conveniently put together that this was, in fact, a house of separate apartments. But he thought that, in fact, it was simply *one* house. Tanner followed the budding young couple through the battered side door in one of the many odd abutments of the structure, and fell into a kind of ultra-dismal

mental vegetation.

Goodbyes were quickly said, and the two trudged up the immense staircase, disappearing into a the maze-like structure of the upper floors. There was little doubt about what was going to occur in those passionate morning hours.

For Tanner, though, there was the comfortable downstairs area, which was wide and vacant and dim in the wee hours of the morning. He felt his buzz become sluggish. He wanted another beer.

The windows were long in the way that windows were over a hundred years ago. The place must have, in it's hey day, been a manse for some wealthy family. Tanner, not realizing that the present state of dilapidation suggested not that it was a single residence, but a plethora of residences, wondered, exactly, how in the hell Kev managed to afford it.

(It will be noted for posterity that Tanner Benjamin had only known of the existence of Kev a fortnight hence, and so, in consideration of this fact, he can be forgiven for being ignorant of the details of so many of the facets of the so-charming man's existence)

He wandered into the kitchen, which was long and unhygienic looking, and very bright due to the fluorescents. He suddenly had the first few stirrings of uneasiness as he padded about, looking in the various empty cabinets.

Tanner had just read the novel *American Psycho* by the writer Brett Easton Ellis. The novel portrays a very rich young Wall Street investment broker with the odd habit of relentlessly and brutally killing his dates. Tanner, in his own powerfully drunken way, was beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Kev seemed to have money, always. Maybe rich parents. He had this big, creepy house. An inheritance? He was always with young women. Well, he was attractive and charming in a strange, repulsive way.

Then, they were never seen with him again...

Tanner spun around, looked at the refrigerator, and walked toward it slowly. His arm started to quiver. He put out his arm slowly, envisioning the brutal carnage that must, surely, lay inside.

Heads wrapped in plastic baggies. Severed limbs. Real Jeffrey Dahmer-style kiddy munchies. He put his drunken finger tips on the handle, too scared for a moment to do anything but stand there and stare.

What if, all of a sudden, she started screaming from upstairs? What would I do? Would I run upstairs and try to be Mr. Superhero He-Man, and save her, even though, potentially, he might have a weapon, maybe even a chainsaw or a meat cleaver? Would I risk becoming another statistic, another strange, young form found floating in a river or buried in a shallow grave in some rural area?

He could well-imagine Crazy Kev coming downstairs, blood soaked, naked, with a look of sheer, demonic fury on his boyish face, and pouncing on him like a young panther in heat.

He was in the belly of the beast.

He suddenly sucked in his fear, and in one bold swoop he opened the door.

His heart skipped a beat.

There was only one beer left.

Nine

But that had been months ago, and Kev hadn't expected to run into Tanner tonight. That had been a bad scene. Real bad. He had to get out of Beowulf's, cross the bridge, and get over to campus, where folks were still decent.

He had a few toughs with hearts of gold that were ready to pound him flat, after the shit he pulled tonight. And he did, in his own way, generally feel bad. He liked Tanner, even though Tanner was, essentially, a little girl in a twenty-five year old body. But if the guy wanted to hang out with big boys, he had to learn tough, right?

He had walked into Beowulf's after smoking crack, and he

had been drinking some, too. And he had had some pills. He was trashed, and he wanted to be more trashed.

He had seen him curled like a little baby in a puddle of spilt beer at the farthest table. And damn, he was with the hottest female that Kev had laid eyes on in quite some time.

“Hey Tanner, what the fucks up man?”

Tanner looked up at him blearily. He looked like he had been dragged over five miles of rough road. Kev backed away, mumbled something, and then proceeded to initiate brainwashing on the very hot young lass that seemed to be hovering in circles around Tanner.

“Hey, weren’t you in my freshman comp class? It was with Rudolf?”

He sized her up quickly, decided that boyish and stupid would be the best way to operate. Sabrina looked at him, nonplussed, and then said, “Hey, I don’t think so. I know you do look familiar though.”

“Maybe it was at one of my karate tournaments. Do you get into karate? I have two black belts.”

“No.”

“Well, thing is when I lived with my dad out in Cali, I use to run around with this guy that was in the Eight Ball Posse, and he shot this guy who was in a rival gang, and you know it was kind of a like a guilt with association type thing. So I started learning some moves, and I got good enough at it to start competing. But then I got all fucked up. Coke. I had to split. Came here. Now I’m clean. Except for when I smoke grass.”

This was the one that always worked. He started talking faster, building the intense magnification of his personal charisma to that fine, white-hot point that always reeled them in and left them begging for more. Well, the dumb ones, at any rate.

Sabrina turned on her heel, and considered the options laid out before her. To one side Kev, to the other Peter Davenport (who had leaned quite far into the bar now, was sighing, and looking up and down the length at whoever and whatever seemed

to have attached itself to a stool and a mug), and, below and slightly to the left, a very drunk, remorseful Tanner.

Milt Seebaum became that rarity at Beowulf's: the righteously, shit-faced academic. He swayed, nearly colliding into a few other patrons, into the filthy, foul-smelling cubby marked *men*.

Unfortunately, a four hundred pound biker was busily occupying the only existent stall. His copious bowel eruptions only added a seasoning of repulsion to the entire effect, and suddenly Milt bowed before a piss stinking porcelain urinal and erupted into a veritable geyser of gushing red and black streaked beer vomit.

"Ya doin' all right, buddy row?"

The four hundred pound biker asked, erupting once again into a gastric raspberry, and Milt felt what was left of his sanity and self respect come up with his lunch, dinner, and four glasses of Stout.

He was crawling now. There was a half-inch of scum on the floor, certainly a mixture of mud, dust, boot grease, urine, and saliva. It slimed the palms of his hands with it's miasmal grit, and as he held his head up like a wagging dog, he realized that the lavatory, though it had been spinning before, was doing less so now.

Dribblets of puke streamed from the corners of his lips, and one nostril.

Undignified, damn undignified, was all that he could think.

Patricia Ireland had not vomited, but her tolerance to inebriates was much higher. In fact, she had spent the ensuing hours getting rather busily acquainted with several free-floating groups of people. She had managed to convey, to all of them, the epic saga of her life story, in fleeting bursts and to quickly turning backs.

"And so, you know how it is, I was alone, and so I decided

that I would...oh, he's rude."

"Yeah he's like that. What did you say your name was?"

"Patricia. So anyway, like I was saying, I decided that I just couldn't deal with all the Betsy Homemaker shit, and so I told Dan that he could take his offer, and ya know, shuv it, and I decided that I wanted to go after my Masters, and so..."

Various surly, unimpressed men had already decided, based on the two red fully-blown pupils that exposed themselves during this confessional that (a) Patricia had been smoking a lot of grass, (b) She was probably more annoying straight than stoned, and, consequently, not much worth the hassle unless you were really desperate.

Tanner, suddenly, had let loose. He began to bawl in the inimitable Tanner fashion, his head cradled into the crook of his arm. He sobbed in loud, guffawing gasps, and heads popped up and turned.

Kev was suddenly very disgusted.

He grabbed Tanner by the sleeve of his little leather jacket.

"Tanner!...what the fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck is wrong with you, man?"

He began to jerk Tanner around like a ragged doll. Several people popped up with, "he's drunk man leave him alone."

He pulled Tanner out his seat. Sabrina jumped into action. She began to pound Kev on the side of one meaty arm, and grabbed the other sleeve of Tanner's jacket. Now they were involved in a taffy-pull. It was ludicrous at best.

A row of beer glasses toppled across the bar, soaking various laps. Muttered cries of profanity and disgust erupted from bearded and fuzzy lips. Peter Davenport thought it was hilarious, to say the least, but thought that he would add, "aw hey man, don't do that to the guy man. C'mon, he's a little guy man." He lifted not a finger to help. He no longer really considered spending the evening with the crazy bitch to be in the realm of real possibilities.

"Let him go, mother fucker!"

“Nah, I’m taking this son of a bitch outside and teaching him a lesson! You’ll like him better, afterwards. I promise.”

Tanner began to laugh. Really, really laugh.

Suddenly, a four hundred pound biker stepped up behind Kev and politely told him that, if he didn’t stop what he was trying to do, the four hundred pound biker would make sure that Kev couldn’t have children anymore. Tanner was hastily let go, Kev turned around, began to apologize, to the biker, to people with wet beer lap, and finally to Sabrina. Tanner, by the force of backward projection, started to twist out of Sabrina’s grasp. But they managed to find him some stability, and he made it to his feet.

A bartender walked up to Kev, got very close to his face, and told him he was kicked out on a semi-permanent basis.

That had been half an hour or so ago. Maybe.

He walked up onto the porch, finally able to see, in the damp light coming from the door, a few faces seated around on the ledge outside, smoking cigarettes and hefting bottles.

“Party here tonight?” He tried to sound hopeful.

Nobody answered him.

He quickly opened and shut the screen door, walked inside to find Lance from *Saturn in Retrograde*. The living room was trashed, but the living room was always trashed. Biff Speedo and his girlfriend had passed out on each other.

“Where’s Lance? Hey”.

No reply.

He walked into the kitchen. It was typically dirty.

Where was everybody?

Didn’t they realize he would be over?

She had never tailed anyone in her life, but she realized she had a special aptitude for it that night.

He was damn drunk though, much too drunk to be behind the wheel. He was shooting the line, weaving in and out, and barely stopping at signs and lights. He started suspecting, she knew, that she might be a cop.

She could picture him, his gradual sense of unease mounting. DUI was too stupid an offense for him to tolerate getting pulled over for, especially since he had a hot piece of ass he had just paid to lay. She wondered how long it would take him to realize that it was his “old lady’s” car.

He began to take odd turns, go down roads she wasn’t familiar with. Where was he going?

“I think we got a pig on our ass, baby. I’m gonna try to lose him”.

He veered wildly, letting the steering wheel run smooth through his fingers. He knew what he was doing, He used to be a stock car driver.

“Hey baby, did you know I use to be a stock car driver?”

“No.”

She answered demurely. She was a little nervous now. She couldn’t afford to get busted again. She didn’t like jail much. She could never find anywhere to apply her makeup.

He sailed through neighborhoods, down avenues, past playgrounds, through backyards, and over small critters. But she had a bead on him. She would hang his balls around his neck tonight, or she would die trying.

In the backseat, crouched low and shivering with cold and fright, her ten year old daughter tried hard to maintain conversational telepathic tones with the ever-enigmatic Skimmy.

Boom. Rattle. Clatter.

Skree!

Now, it was almost a chase. Now she could feel her blood pressure rise. It was well past midnight. It was the hour of the wolf.

“Oh shit. That’s no cop, baby. Know who that is?”

She breathed, inwardly, an intense sigh of relief.

“Who?”

He smiled.

‘It’s my fucking sister, man.’

“We’re getting the fuck out of here. C’mon”

Milt Seebaum stumbled from the men’s room. His head was a massive, pounding industrial press of pain, but at least he could circumnavigate through the tiny dotted crowd.

“Sabrina...are we leaving?”

“Yes. Get Patricia.”

“I think I’d rather you just left us here, if you don’t mind.”

She considered.

“No. No, you’re coming too. And you don’t dare say no to me, Milt. Believe me. Now.”

Seebaum managed, with much difficulty, to move back over to the side of the bar closest to the empty stage. Pat Ireland was sitting by her lonesome, oblivious to all and everything, apparently enjoying some vague recollection or thought that only held any relevance for her.

“Pat. Sabrina says we have to leave. They tried to kill Tanner. I think I’m going to die from alcohol poisoning.”

She looked up for a moment, uncomprehending. Then stated, as if she had just woken up from a long, dreamful sleep, “What? Oh, we’re going?”

They made their way back across the bar, and altogether walked out the ancient, rickety door.

A few huffs of appraisal and indignation were spat at them as the exited.

Gary knelt low, wiping the face of the sink and the dishwasher in utter, numbed exhaustion. He had eaten nothing

the entire day. He hadn't had time to take a break.

They had just closed the grill. The thoroughly-tattooed lummoX had taken his apron off, wiped sweat from his forehead, thrown his spatula down, and said, "Man, I am going to go home and smoke an entire eighth."

"I feel that shit."

"Hey, before we do this shit, you wanna smoke a joint with me Gar? You know we deserve it, my man."

Gary's head shot up and he half-turned and looked at him. Under normal circumstances it would not have happened. But tonight had been anything but normal. He said, "Sure."

"Cool". He drew the word out and did a little half-nod. He went downstairs to get his coat.

They walked out the side door, Gary still wearing his apron, walked across the street past the upstairs tattoo parlor and hot dog stand, and in back of the campus coffee shop. It was catty corner to a popular bar with a fenced-in patio area. Someone whistled at them from behind the fence. There had to be eighty seven people crammed back there.

"Hey, I bet I have a bigger dick than your boyfriend."

There was a slight pause, and a female voice said, half-mockingly, "betcha don't".

"You wanna find out?" Keith turned back to Gary, spat, said, "stupid bitch." They got into Keith's car.

Keith produced one very skinny little joint. It was of the variety commonly referred to as a "pinner".

"Its weak, dude. But it'll do in a pinch. Man, it was fucking busy tonight."

"Yeah. And lucky me fucking Tanner decides to take the fucking night off."

Keith lit the joint, took a hit, and raspily intoned, "You want me to kill him?"

He passed it.

They both broke into laughter.

"No. I'm saving him for myself. When that little shit comes

into get his last check, I'm gonna make him blow me for it."

"Damn."

More laughter. Another toke. Keith turned on some god awful heavy alternative rock.

"I love these guys. I party with them. They're called---"

But he was cut short. A campus cop car came up the alley, creeping, looking for just such a situation as they had put themselves in.

"Oh shit."

There was a very tense moment when they wondered, maddeningly, if the car was going to come to a slow halt in the middle of the alley, and the cop was going to emerge and ask them exactly what they were both doing sitting in a parked car smoking a very tiny, weak joint.

Ten

At roughly the same moment, a BMW sports model that had been obtained for the young driver out of the good graces of his father's not inconsiderable wealth slicked it's way down the battered street like a predator. Behind the wheel and in the passenger seat, two young men brooded on what was to transpire during the rest of the night.

"Here, listen to this."

The volume of the CD player was cranked to earsplitting level. The car began to vibrate with the fury of the music of a popular death metal band. The lyrics (which were barely discernible) were a glorification of sadism and murder.

"It's cool. I saw them last summer at Ozzfest. I couldn't fucking believe it. The singer asked everyone in the audience to spit on him...so here I am, up front, and I see these security people just start to back out of the way. And I didn't know what was coming---"

"Ah hah. You got fucking covered in goober didn't you?"

“It was fucking disgusting. He just rolled around in it naked. I couldn’t fucking believe it.”

The music pounded and droned. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds. They could both feel the tension in the car mount.

The driver turned down a dizzying succession of different side streets. Already they had driven, quickly and erratically, through the country. The driver, Kyle, could feel his temples pound. He didn’t know if he wanted to go through with this shit or not. It all seemed too final, somehow. After you committed an act like they were going to commit in the next, approximately, sixty minutes where was there left to go?

“Do you think we’ll make the news?”

“Big time. They will never forget this shit. It will go down in history.”

The driver sighed. He could feel the shakiness in his arms, the hollow feeling of fear and hatred that nestled in his skinny chest. He would be leaving some things behind: his girlfriend, for starters. But it didn’t matter. This was the world as it would be. You could only stave off the inevitable for so long.

“Darren...do you really want to go through with this shit? Tonight?”

The young man in the passenger seat looked out the window at the darkened storefronts that whisked by. In 19 years of living it had built up: the hatred, the confusion, the torment. He didn’t really think of anything as being real anymore, not in the sense that there was something, some future he could look to, and be certain of. It all seemed so senseless, so lacking in any meaning.

College. He didn’t want to go to college. Work? He didn’t want to do that either. He didn’t have any options left. The world had failed him. It ceased to amuse.

“Yeah. We have to do it tonight, Kyle. You fucking know that. It’s tonight, or never.”

The driver turned again, sharply. He drove into the kind of

upscale housing edition where he had been raised. He looked out across darkened lawns, at two car garages, three hundred thousand dollar homes, and what must be whatever was left of the typical American family, sleeping inside.

He could see Buddy and Junior in their respective rooms. Mom upstairs in curlers, unable to sleep without the aid of valium. Dad would be in the den, watching a DVD on the massive color television set. It was all so empty it made him want to shake.

“Yeah...fuck it. Let’s do it. There’s no reason to become a part of this. This is what killed the world. This is what they wanted us to become when we graduated. How could they be so fucking...empty? So lifeless. So dead...”

He began to mouth the words blasting out of the car speakers. He found it gave him courage. In the trunk, they had two semi-automatic machine guns and enough ammo to take out the population of a small island nation.

It was going to be a tough Sunday morning.

They started off by pulling out in the country and toking up. That was going to make it a lot easier, a lot more painful. Kyle and Darren laid out on the hood of the car for a moment, staring out at the stars.

“You believe in astrology, Dare?”

“No.”

“Neither do I...I was told once, by a girl I went out with whose mom was all into the shit, that I was born under a ‘dark star’. A Bad sign, or some shit. I’m a Sagittarius. That’s all I know. I don’t even know what the fuck it means.”

“I’m a Capricorn... Capricorn’s ruled by Saturn.”

Kyle turned slightly and looked at his friend.

“How in the fuck did you know that?”

“I didn’t. It’s just a line from some old movie I saw once... Oh, yeah, it’s from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Bullshit. I know what I’m talking about. You just don’t remember.”

He sat up, looked down at Kyle, and said, “okay, remember the scene where they were in the van, and she’s got an astrology magazine, and she’s talking to the last girl, you know the last girl to get killed?”

Pause.

“Yeah.”

“Well, she tells her that Capricorn is ruled by Saturn... that Saturn is malefic. Remember how they had all that solar flare shit right at the beginning? Before it shows the first corpse, and it’s kind of tied up on this post and shit.”

Kyle sat up. He pretended he was overly interested in the topic.

“Yeah, oh yeah. Now I remember.”

Darren Rawlings spit, reached in his pack for a cigarette, and lit it with trembling hands. He sucked in the smoke like it was all that stood between him and certain, instantaneous death.

The country creaked and groaned. They were farther out than they wanted to be, and to get done what they had to do tonight, they would need to get going shortly.

Suddenly, Darren didn’t want to anymore. Not at all. Now, he simply wanted to go home and sit in front of his computer. It had seemed, for the past month that they had been planning this, like it was all just another game. He had joyously taken part in the germinating of the idea, in the plotting, in the fantasy aspects of the whole thing. But now the day was here, a date picked arbitrarily from the calendar. A date that everything ended.

“I’m gonna miss movies the most man. I love the movies.”

“My favorite movie is *Taxi Driver*.”

“I like *The Dirty Dozen*, *Death Wish*, *Halloween*, *Scarface*...”

Kyle suddenly broke into a very bad Al Pacino impersonation.

“Say hello to my little friend! Bap bap bap bap bap!

He began to shoot imaginary mafia hit men lurking in the

woods.

A few moments later, Kyle rolled off the hood of the car, and Darren, slowly, drudgingly, followed. The two young men went to the trunk of the car, pulled it open, and revealed the two AK 47-style assault weapons.

Kyle's ears pounded. His chest heaved. He had the most massive, nervous erection he had ever experienced in the course of his life.

It was time.

They got in the car. Here was resolution. Here was finality. They pulled out of the dirt road that looked out over a dismal, overgrown pond, executed a haphazard roundabout, and found there way back out onto eighteen. Headed back to town. Headed toward destiny.

They were no longer losers, in their mind. Now, their names would be written in horrific, cheap, tabloid ink for all time. They would be consigned, even in death, upon the archives of crime history forevermore. Between the pages of bad books. On the covers of garish, too brightly printed magazines. Over and over they would be the stuff of nightmares, ejaculating their naked truth into the world in a way that had made Manson, and Bundy, and Dahmer household names.

And all Darren Rawlings could think about was, *this is the American Dream...this is the American Dream...this is the American Dream...*

Eleven

The cop had not stopped.

"Goddamn that was close. Man, that was really fucking scary."

The joint had been lifted back up, tensely, and toked a few more times.

“Okay, now...we have shit to do. Keith, my man...this has been *good*.”

Gary slapped his hand. Keith’s hand was an immensely gnarled, knotted piece of flesh that was, also, heavily tattooed. He rolled the window down slowly, letting the pot smoke drift out. People nearby would smell the heavy funk of it, and know what had just taken place. But not the cop, thought Gary, and that is *good too*. He found the word good was a hundred miles high and a football field long in his mind. He began to giggle. He was stoned.

“Okay, Gare, let’s do it. I’ll get the matts if you just worry about the dishes. We’ll bust the bitch down in no time.”

They got out of the car, slammed the doors, and started to walk across the parking lot. Around them, standing on balconies overlooking the lot, richer than thou girls and their paramours yelled a few loud, half-hearted inanities and whoops to the drunken still-dark morning. Music--- loud, pumping, strummed, blasted, and or otherwise---seemed to be coming in from all different directions. The sidewalks were still teeming with floating university fodder.

“It ain’t church time yet, is it Gare? Hour of the wolf.”

Gary shot his head back suddenly, and did a werewolf howl. Laughter and Keith Decker followed him into the side door of Delcino’s. Back to the kitchen that still had to be cleaned.

Suddenly, Gary’s buzz disappeared completely. There was something wrong. He could just feel it in the air.

Out in the bar, a dull roar of voices still partied, still drank, still enjoyed being young. The bartender, Sykes, was popular, quick, and good looking. The waitresses had all either split, or were out in the crowd at a table, working off the stress of the evening. Nothing was wrong. This was the way it had been ever since he started here, and he had been working here for four years.

Yet, something *was* wrong. Or, was going to be. He could

feel his chest start to heave.

“Y-you all right, buddy?”

Keith Decker was busily folding a towel around his hand, getting ready to clean the grill.

“Yeah...I, just, all of a sudden...”

He grabbed his chest.

“Dude...it’s just the bud man. It’s stronger than what I said. Shit just hit you hard. Why don’t you sit down for a minute?”

Keith actually looked very perturbed for a minute, as if to say, *don’t you dare fucking freak out on me and have to go to the hospital or some shit, man.*

“No, no, I’ll be fine. C’mon. We gotta get this shit done.”

Gary started to pick up dishes and load them in the washer. He moved as quickly, under the circumstances, as it was possible for him to do. Still, he couldn’t shake the menacing vibe of evil that had steeled over him. He felt like he might keel over in fright.

Sabrina, Tanner, Milt, and Patricia all went like some sort of mad posse out the front door, down the alley, and all of sudden, realized they were actually headed in the wrong direction. They had parked across the street.

“W-what the fuck are we doing? We didn’t park in the back lot.”

Sabrina pivoted like a top and the rest stumblingly followed. Before they could take another step, they were met by two men who had just walked into Beowulf’s, seen that whoever they were supposed to meet was, in fact, not there, and left.

The two were very large, had clean-shaven heads, and were wearing barely readable tee-shirts covered in gothic lettering. One of them had been the man that had sucker-punched Tanner the night before.

“Well, well, well...it’s, what’s your name?”

The two men were standing directly in front of them. They seemed to take a position of barring any passing.

“Hey man, we’re just trying to go home.”

“If I wanted any shit from you, I’d squeeze your head.”

The man that had sucker-punched Tanner at the *Saturn in Retrograde* party the night before strolled up to them casually. They must have been a pretty sight. His friend hovered to the side. He figured they could finish up Tanner right in front of his stupid friends, and probably make off with the hot girl he was with. Then they could take turns fucking her all morning. She would like that.

“Hey honey, why are you with these jerks? Why don’t you try a real man?”

“C’mon guys we just want to go home...”

Suddenly, before Tanner even realized what had happened, blood flew up, spattering them. The bully looked down at a long, beautiful hand holding a smoking gun to his belly. He suddenly yelled, keeled over, and nearly fell in a crouched, fetal position.

There was blood oozing out of his teeth. He looked with rabid eyes up at the little group. Stunned, almost more angry than anything, he kept saying, “You bitch...you fucking bitch...you shot me. You shot me. I can’t believe you fucking shot me.”

Sabrina looked over at his friend. The man completely lost nerve, jittered in place for a moment, as if his legs didn’t know what to do with themselves, and then said, “I-I’m sorry, I’m really fucking sorry man.”

He booked.

The bully was still crouched low in front of them, on one knee. Suddenly, he looked at them, his face imploring.

“C-could you please call an ambulance? Please. Could you call an ambulance?”

Sabrina spit, “Call one yourself.”

He fell flat. He was bleeding profusely. The four of them stood there a moment. He was dying. The shock was so numbing, it was anti-climactic.

Tanner suddenly realized something.

There had been no report. No sound from the gun.

It had been a completely *silent* shooting.

“What the *fuck* did you do, Sabrina?”

Tanner said it slowly, as if he couldn’t quite put it all together.

“It’s easy...she just killed a man.”

Pat Ireland suddenly crumpled against Milt’s chest, breathlessly weeping.

“Ohmigod, Milt...why’d she do that? I can’t believe it she just killed him in cold blood oh my god Milt how could anyone...”

And on and on.

“It was easy for her Pat. She’s a monster. We’re her prisoners. Isn’t that right, Tanner? Haven’t you realize that yet? No. You were too stoned to take tonight seriously.”

Sabrina stepped away from them and turned suddenly saying, “We have got to get the fuck out of here, folks. Now. Before somebody comes out here and sees this shit.”

Suddenly, something exploded in Tanner’s head. An idea. A vision. He knew what to do now. It was as clear as day.

In one quick move he lowered his body, and like a charging bull drove his tough little skull directly into Sabrina’s gut. He was surprised at how thin, how spent she seemed. How easy it was to just bowl her over.

She fell back, sprawled across the alley, and Tanner jumped on top of her. He suddenly had the gun out of her hand. He held it out on the end of arms that felt as heavy as lead bars. Suddenly, everything began to move at a blur. Milt and Pat wanted to go inside Beowulf’s and get help. Sabrina rose shakily to her feet, and looked at Tanner as if to say, *and this is how you repay me? For all the fun we’ve had tonight? Bastard.*

Tanner would have none of it. Now, for the first time tonight, he had the gun. He was in charge. There was a dead man laying in the alley in front of them, and any minute the place was going to be swarming with drunks, cops, curious people. He wasn’t going down like that.

He commandeered them all out of the alley, and across the street as quickly as their legs could carry them. Then, making sure to keep the gun poised upon her right cheek, he told Sabrina to start driving.

“Tanner...” She said, looking at him, half-smiling. “Tanner, do you even know how to fire the mother fucker?”

“My dad was in the army. He use to take me to the rifle range all the time. Do you want to find out if I can the hard way?”

Pat Ireland was still sobbing madly, and it became even louder, more grotesque with the car doors shut.

Milt suddenly reached over in drunken fury and slapped her. Hard. Violently.

Tanner told him to fucking stop.

Sabrina smiled.

Tanner put the tip of the gun to her temple.

The car screeched away in in a squeal of burning rubber.

Minutes later, two men exited the bar, turned down the alley and discovered the man that Sabrina had shot. He was laying on his stomach.

In the darkness, it was impossible for two drunks to see a pool of slick blood under a man.

“Ha! He fucking passed out here. Boy, is he gonna be in for a surprise when he wakes up tomorrow.”

They both continued walking, past the back parking lot, through the fast-decaying neighborhoods that had once known opulence. On the way back to their mutual home, they talked about Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Twelve

Mary Lee pulled on her panties, her favorite skirt, adjusted her make-up, and chatted on her cell phone simultaneously.

“Well, what did he say exactly? Yeah? Yeah. Like, how did he put it? Like, did he seem like he would be interested? Or what. Yeah. Yeah. I’ll be there. I’ll meet you outside. Like, ten minutes. Oh dude, I hope he shows up. Yeah! He’s like a fucking fox, Beth. Okay. Okay Love you too. Okay. See ya. Okay. Okay. Ten minutes. Stat.”

She fluffed her hair. She sprayed some hairspray. She was going down to the University Village, to Delcino’s, to lay claim on a boy. He would be there, living up Saturday night with his friends. He was too much. He was a fucking fox.

She hadn’t, really planned on going out tonight. Men were such pigs, and all they ever thought about was one thing.

She didn’t have a problem giving it to someone that was worthy. But so few of them actually excited her. It was the repetition of their one demand that was so infuriating. It was like the single track of a steel-trap mind. It was hard-wired into them, and everything else was just part of the disguise.

She looked at herself in the full length mirror. She was a bold creature, a looker, and she knew she could take her pick. It hadn’t always been like that. Once, she had been fat, frumpy, and unloved. Then she had wised up. She had started skipping meals, then starving herself for days at a time.

She did jumping jacks in front of the mirror, naked. She lived on Ramen noodles and green beans. She puked up sweets.

Little by little the pounds had come off. And the boys had started to take notice. In high school, and now college, she had done a complete about-face. She lost the weight, lost the shyness, and started buying fashion magazines. She maxed out a credit card on new clothes, sexy underwear, and perfume. She started visiting a tanning salon.

She wasn’t going to be one of those old women who never managed to snag a hubby. She had been raised to be a breeder, a homemaker, a mother. Well, she could snag the man now, if she could only find him. There were so many fish out there, and so many of them she caught seemed only to be worthy of only a

look before being tossed back out to the river. It made her, often, sigh inwardly.

There. She looked good. She looked ready. She looked like she could whip the competition hands-down. She slipped into her sexy heels, bloused the top, and pursed her lips. She grabbed her purse.

In truth, she reflected, she probably looked a little like a hooker. But, hey, whatever it took. This guy had it. He was, like, a total hunk. It was, like, going to be her night.

She opened the door of her little hatch-back, slinked inside, revved the engine, and thought for a moment. Had she forgotten anything? She started rummaging around in her purse.

Lipstick. Check. Money. Check. Mace. Check.

Condoms.

She started up the car, pulled out of the driveway, headed out to the CVS Pharmacy on Wheeling. She had time. Beth could wait. It was only ten-thirty.

In her world.

Part 3

Thirteen

She was in most respects a happy woman. Except, of course, when Leland beat her.

It was just something she had to bear, she realized. Divorce was not an option if you were the wife of a highly-respected local physician. Not if you had no way to maintain the lifestyle to which you had become accustomed.

Wasn't that the meaning behind it all, anyway? To enjoy as much of life as you could, possibly, enjoy, despite the circumstances? Her circumstances were, remarkably, descent. He didn't even get angry all that often anymore. Just sat upstairs in his study, brooding.

Her name was Anna, and she had come from a distant land

to marry Doctor Durant. It had been like a page torn from a fairy book romance then. She had escaped life on a farm in miserable County Cork to come and live in America. To be looked after by servants, and to be kept like another pet in the collection of her dear, mad and maddening husband.

He was not all that handsome, she surmised one evening, looking out across the veranda, but he had handsome money. And she finally knew, after so many years of cold, intense pondering, what the meaning of her future might be. It was to be a kept lady. A pretty bird in a nice, residential cage.

At least it beat cooking breakfast for farm hands.

She had the entire house to herself. It was so dark, so quiet at night. She liked nothing better than to go out on the balcony in the dead of evening, her white chemise slip blowing lightly in the gale, and stare up at the stars. Often, Leland was gone at nights.

That was good. That was very, very good. More time to plot and ponder. More time to dream.

She supposed that one day she might be a ghost. She knew that, quite possibly, this old house with its ceilings and its wide expanse of lawn, and its lush, over-bright garden in the back, would probably outlive them. Outlive their marriage, their loves, their hopes, and would continue to hold the patterns of their existence within itself until time ceased to move into the yawning mouth of infinity. And would she still be here, out on the terrace, looking up at the stars?

What did the future hold? Already, there had been a Great War, the airplane, the automobile, the radio. Would Negroes ever have the same rights as white men? She hoped so, for God's sake. Her favorite woman in the world was their old black cook Henrietta.

Anna winced sometimes to realize the contradiction inherent in America being the "Land of the Free", and an entire class of its citizens being unable to sit at the same lunch counters as her and her husband, and all the other women like her and all

the other men like her husband.

Tonight, the wind blew lightly, cooling the damp sheen of sweat that had accumulated in her lonely bed. What must it be like, she wondered, to have a man that you could count on being there when the sun went down? Jules had started to slip out more and more, with a nod and a few mumbled words, saying he was going to be “busy” this evening. She never asked him where he went. She damn well knew better.

She realized he might be having an affair. But what did it really matter? Whether he was or he wasn't, it was an option that was forbidden her, and granted him as privilege of his male station. She wanted to spit when she thought of it. She wondered if that was something that was ever going to change either.

She pined for a lover. For comfort. For a man that was understanding, gracious, a joy to be with. It was getting cold. She pulled her robe tight around her, cast a glance down the road at the mammoth hotel erected by Mr. Rexroth, a friend of her husbands, and went back through the glass doors and into the darkness of her room.

Mr. Rexroth was one of the more distasteful individuals she had to accommodate on behalf of her husband. He was a skinny, putrid little blackguard with a perpetual cigar smoldering at the end of his liver-colored lips. But it was his moustache, a black streak that approximated a smudge of grease paint, that seemed to add the appropriate villainous cast to his character. She loathed him.

He was forever, infernally, falsely, forcedly polite. And he was a masher. She could feel his lecherous stare whenever Leland walked in the door with him in tow.

“Well, and there's the lovely Anna Durant. My, do you get more lovelier every time I look at you?”

And then he would take her hand, bow, and plant a little kiss on the knuckles. It made her want to be ill.

“C'mon, Rexroth, let's go into the study and go over some of those accounts. I think something needs to be settled.”

And the two of them would trudge upstairs, and slam the study door, and be there until late, drinking gin and smoking a veritable bumper crop of expensive cigars.

She was left to putter in the garden, or sit with ice tea and a good book.

She walked over to her bed and slipped off the robe. She slowly slipped beneath the covers, wondering, not for the first time, if there was anything more to life. Then she closed her eyes. For the last time.

He had carefully dipped the entire body in nitric acid. It left a sort of pink sludge behind, a noxious poison soup that was easily disposed of by flushing down the drain. He had done this afterward, eager to be rid of the mess. It was going to be a long, hard few weeks for him.

He knew he wanted to get rid of the bitch after he found out that she had been involved with Rexroth. He got Morgan so hammered that Morgan had to fess up. And what did he do then?

He busted him in the kisser, hard. Morgan was tough, but Leland was that much tougher. The old scoundrel fell over in his chair, and tried to deny it. Said he'd been fooling. Said he was just trying to get the best of him. Well, piss on it. He was suspicious now, and that was all it took.

Besides, the insurance money was going to be sweet. It was going to be enough to open up a new set of offices, with new equipment. It was going to be enough to do a lot of things that he wasn't going to be needing Anna for anymore.

He had left that day, late in the afternoon, putting on his hat and this time, instead of giving her the silent treatment, he had very lovingly, very tenderly turned around and looked at her as she came down the stairs.

"Gone for the night?" She asked, hopefully.

He turned. She was as lithe, as beautiful as a young girl from County Cork could be. She had been all his, for awhile. But

now, she seemed old. Tainted. He realized the thrill of possession was gone. Now, she seemed more like an interloper, a parasite than anything.

“Yes, dear, I’m going out to the Lodge. There’s an emergency meeting tonight. Tony called and said it was mandatory. Sorry, my dear.”

She looked strange for a moment.

“Sorry. What on earth are you sorry for?”

“For spending so much time away in the evenings. I have never let you in on what I do, but trust me, it’s nothing that would jeopardize our marriage, or happiness. You have no reason to be suspicious of me, I mean to say. I am a man of honor. Truthfully Ann, you’ve made me the happiest man in the entire world.”

“And you’ve made me the happiest wife,” she said, quietly, forcing a smile.

She looked at him as he stood there, taking in his huge frame, his sharp professional suit, his general “give ‘em hell” bearing. He was so damned ugly, his nose a large, thick wedge, his eyes a deep, evil blue that seemed somehow to be so empty. So lifeless.

And he was an unnatural, aggressive man in bed. And a bit of a dud, to be quite frank.

“Well, must be going now, my dear. Don’t wait up. I will probably be very late.”

“Okay.”

He walked quickly through the door, swinging his briefcase, his highly-polished shoes clacking. He walked down the sloping hill to the walk, and got into his car. He would then proceed out of town to a non-descript house used often for purposes of bootlegging and prostitution. It was at the end of a country road, and handled by a Negro pimp named Firpo Lewis.

Morgan would be waiting there. They would drink. Morgan owed him a couple of favors, and he had pretty much made his intentions apparent the night before, whether what Morgan was said was true or not. It didn’t matter now. All he had thought

about for the past three days was the life insurance policy he had taken out on Anna. Dear, sweet country girl from a foreign land, doomed to die in the Land of the Free.

It had a certain poetry about it that he found comforting.

At first he was going to panic because he thought the place was deserted, but he realized the cars must have been parked in the ancient barn in back.

He rolled into the front yard.

He knocked the code on the door.

“Cops.”

He was let in quickly.

“Well I’ll be a...it’s Doc. Come on in. Mr. Rexroth is waiting for you.”

“Firpo, you are a nigger after my own heart.”

“Well, thank you sir. Sure is good of you to say.”

“If they ever try to hang you just let me know. I’ll come around with my buck knife, and set you loose. You hear me, boy?”

“Loud and clear, Doc. I hear you loud and clear.”

The place was like some barren cross between a cocktail lounge and a criminal hideout. A few straggling, homely women sat around on buggy furniture, wearing yesterdays dismal refuse of dresses and frilly bed wear.

Rexroth sat at a battered old table in what, under normal circumstances, would have been a kitchen. He was playing solitaire and chain smoking. Beside him a bottle of cheap hooch was half-empty.

“Hey, so why do you want to do this so bad all of a sudden? You know I was just pulling a fast one. Why now?”

He crushed a cigarette, pulled another one and lit it. He barely looked at Leland. But that was okay.

“Anna, dear Anna, I have decided, has, uh, failed in her wifely duties. I have decided it is time to, uh, ah, well, as you well know, I am not a man to be frustrated. Or the sort of man to

allow certain opportunities to go by, when opportunity knocks. I have recently had a mind to expand my medical practice.”

Morgan nodded. He laid down a few more cards, inhaled his cigarette shakily, and didn’t look up.

“So. You want to turn in one of the two favors I owe you, huh? And so. And so...”

“I just want to borrow a car. That’s it.”

Pause.

“So...you aren’t going to be requiring any, ah, shall we say, any hands-on help? Just need some wheels. Cover you.”

“Exactly.”

Pause.

“She’s a doll. Wish you’d reconsider.”

He puffed his cigarette.

“You know I can’t refuse. You’re in the drivers seat. It’s yours. But if anything happens, you don’t know me. I’ve got contacts you know. In the joint.”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“Who’s threatening? I’m making you a promise. It’s out back. After you get done with it, ditch. I don’t want to know about it.”

“Okay.”

Leland got up slowly, feeling as if his head was spinning. He walked out the rickety kitchen door,

It was a bright day. It was going to be a black, star-shot night, according to the astronomy column in the Gazette. He walked out across the yard to the old barn.

Inside, a number of hot cars and equally hot parts were strewn over the wide, dirt-packed floor. He walked around the little collection as if he were actually going to buy one. He didn’t know a lot about cars, but he appreciated fine things. The contours, the colors, he liked a machine that looked like it had some thought put into it.

A pair of dirty pant legs poked out from beneath one car. Leland walked up to them and said, “Hey. Which one of these

crates is operational?”

The legs, attached to a young man that hadn't been expecting a sudden voice, bumped their unseen forehead against the underbelly of the chassis, and scrambled out, quickly standing up.

Before him, a filthy young man covered in grease and grime and missing a few front teeth stood, wondering if he was about to be beaten, shot, or arrested. Or some combination of the three.

“All be damned, man. Mister, you sure scared the hell out of me.”

Leland looked at the young hood. He was wearing one of those ridiculous damn hats that all the young men were wearing now. Made them look like Jazz joint junkies. And he was *filthy*.

Leland made sure to stand a safe, clean distance.

“Looking to buy a car, huh?”

“Looking to take one. Your Boss owes me a big favor.”

“Well, I'm gonna have to talk to him first.”

The young man quickly walked out the barn door, across the yard, and into the kitchen in back of the house. He was a minor car thief, and a major mechanical mind. He doubled satisfactorily as a toady. He was wanted for murder and rape in Illinois.

He stuck his head in the screen door. Rexroth was pulling from the bottle, smoking, playing solitaire. A long-legged floozy was idly hovering over him. He seemed to take no notice.

“Boss? Boss, did you say this guy could take a car?”

Without looking up, Rexroth said, “Yeah. That is exactly what I said, Charlie. Furthermore, I want you to start paying more attention to people when they come over. You spend all your damn time in the garage. Doc is no stranger here.”

“Oh, okay boss.”

Rexroth turned around slightly. The floozy continued giving him his little massage.

“And another thing, Charlie...take a damn bath, for God's sake. You smell like you rolled around in coyote shit. Got that?”

“Sure, boss.”

“Okay. Get Doc a car that runs good. Go on.”

Rexroth laid down an Ace and an eight. He frowned. He knew damn well what Anna had in store for her in the next few hours. It didn't really chill his blood. After eight years at Durango Penitentiary he didn't think anything could do that.

But it didn't feed his appetite, either. Leland was one card short of being a full-blown psychopathic sadist. And he didn't like doing business with guys like that. It made him triple uneasy.

“Okay, Doc. Boss said to get you a good car. These three run pretty smooth. This one is probably your best bet.”

He walked around the showroom, stopping at a little black, nondescript Ford.

“Tell ya the truth, Doc. This here car probably runs the best. Purrs smoother than a pussy, if you ask me. But you may not want it. See, a guy done himself in in this car. Yeah. Hooked a hose from the exhaust and rolled up the windows. Took forever to air out the stink. You think that sort of thing makes a difference, mister? I think it does. I ain't superstitious, ya understand...it's just...”

“I'll take this one.”

He was headed back out the dirt road and back toward town in a matter of minutes. Around him, the world seemed to darken down, cloud up, the wind blew through tall grasses and fields of corn held their stalks high in salutation to an angry god.

He had stopped and picked up an old suit in a second hand store, changed in the car, and parked down the street, pretending to read the paper until just after dusk. He could see her milling around up there, turning lights on and off, wasting his electricity. Running the damn bill up seemed to be her specialty. Well, he would turn her lights of tonight permanently. Then he could keep the house dim, dark, the way he liked it. He pulled from his

pocket a short length of rope he had knotted especially for this particular occasion.

He waited. He waited. He got out of his car. He walked a piece up the sidewalk, casually, smoking a cigarette. He walked down to the end of the street, to the corner, right in front of his own residence, and looked up at the terrace window.

He could see her come out in the dark. She was like some sort of forlorn bird perched up there, her white gown blowing around her. He thought he could see a little teardrop trickle, faintly, down the corner of one cheek. It was bad stuff. It made him feel spooky. He shook it. He didn't have time for sentimental reflection. There was work to be done.

He walked back up the walk, up the low inclining hill to his backyard property. He slowed a minute while he made his way through the garden.

He let himself in the basement door. Quietly, so quietly he was sure he wasn't even making a hint of noise, he climbed the basement steps, twisting the rope around his hand. He could feel his blood begin to rise. The only sound he could hear was the beating of his own heart.

He opened the basement door as quietly, as smoothly as a spy in an old movie. He walked out into the long kitchen, half-expecting to see the Negro maid slaving away at cleaning the oven in the dark. Well, he could keep the maid at least. Somebody would have to be here to clean up after his little messes.

He walked from the kitchen into the library. He was headed for the main hall, and the beautiful, ornate stairwell that twisted into the upper stories of his house. He walked slowly, cautiously, creeping along in the shadows. He could feel his heart hammer now. His groin was as rigid as a cold, steel flagpole on a November morning. He liked this. He enjoyed this immensely. The thrill of the hunt. Closing in for the kill.

He stopped, suddenly. Something was wrong. There was something in the room that didn't quite add up.

He looked down, suddenly, at an immense billiards table.

He had never, in his life played billiards. He looked at billiards with extreme distaste. He considered the sport of very uncouth, slovenly men. *Quid pro quo*, there was no reason in all of heaven and earth that there should be a billiards table here, now, at eleven o'clock in the evening, when, several hours before there had been none. He spun around.

He was for a moment terrified that he had made a mistake. That, somehow, he had managed to enter the wrong house.

There was a small sort of couch affair he had never seen before. And lying on that couch, in what must have been an alcoholic stupor, was a young man that looked like he had just emerged from some shanty-town hell hole.

Tanner Benjamin was certain that, in his entire life, he had only ever seen a single ghost. But it was an experience he would never forget.

It had been the night he had stayed at Kevin's, drunk, miserable at the thought that Kevin was upstairs, at this very moment, defiling the one sublime object of his most heated infatuations. He had walked from the kitchen, after inspecting the refrigerator to make sure there were no severed heads in the ice box, and had walked back into the long, relatively bare room that served as a billiards room. He had lain down on the ratty old couch, the room spinning, the alcohol and marijuana he had imbibed reaching another bizarre sort of dip and climax affair. His circuitry was frying. His synapses were shooting multi-colored snake-like fireworks.

He fell into a wonderful, fearful, half-dreamlike, half hallucinatory world of dancing images and strange visions. It felt like time had ceased to be.

He then heard a sound that he assumed was somewhere outside of himself. He blearily opened his eyes. It was like a scuffling in the dark. He sat up, in terror that there might be some strange, giant rat lurking about in the old building while tried to sleep.

He jumped. Standing in front of him was a tall imposing man in a dark suit that looked like it came off the back of some dead gangster. He was wearing an old-time fedora, and his eyes burned like twin fires of coal. He was twisting a knotted piece of rope between his gloved hands.

“You’re just a dream,” he said suddenly. “I am drunk, I am stoned, and I am still sleeping.”

Tanner lay back down, and shut his eyes, rolling over.

Leland looked at the image on the couch for a moment, and suddenly realized why today had seemed so strange. All day. Every day. It was like he was caught in some sort of loop. How could he escape?

He turned, suddenly, and walked out the darkened, now-unfamiliar room. He headed back out the way he came. Except, when he got outside, everything else had changed, too. The garden was gone, and all that was left was a gravel driveway full of what he supposed were cars. But they looked so damn strange he wondered if they could fly. He walked out into the alley.

He knelt down by an overflowing trashcan, in an almost mockery of the famous statue of The Thinker. He sat for an interminable period of time, as memory and consciousness began to fade. When he finally came to, he was sitting in his study, going over some papers he wasn’t, in the least, interested in. Today was the big day. He was driving out to the country to meet Rexroth.

He had a favor he wanted to cash in.

Tanner later realized he must have seen the ghost of Leland Durant. He heard faintly the story, just a few rumors, and was intrigued enough to check it out for himself first hand. He went to the archives at the University Library, began digging into local history, found out as much as he needed to know about Dr. Durant, the suspicious disappearance of his wife, the investigation, the insurance claim. It had all gone down in what was now a bunch of cheap sleeping-rooms. The same place he

had passed out for the night.

Dr. Durant was suspected of illegal abortions. He was arrested in sixty-nine, at an ungodly age, for selling amphetamine to high school students. He had tried to stab the arresting officer that time.

But he always avoided an indictment. He had high-placed friends, locally. He was a Freemason, a friend to the KKK, and a friend to certain “crook-noses” that sometimes have interests in small towns . He shot two men to death in his own home, in his own office, because he claimed they were trying to “blackmail” him. Again, he got off scot-free.

He died in the mid-seventies, the only legal action every taken against him being a revoking of his medical license after the amphetamine arrest. But he had been beyond retirement age anyway, and died four years later, an embittered old boogeyman. The local goblin. The stuff of dreary bedtime stories.

Or nightmares. Tanner would never forget the old photograph of Dr. Durant he managed to find in the microfiche at the library. His blood had chilled inside of him. He felt the tendrils of fear grip his spine.

The man in the photo had *exactly* the same face. It was a bad photograph, a picture of him entering a court room. But it was undeniably the same.

Tanner didn't sleep very well that night. He kept seeing those eyes. That mad, hungry look. That damned gaze of ultimate confusion.

He had seen death. And it had been terrible.

Fourteen

Boom!

The car had bounded over a hill, and landed with a crunch. It brought him back to the present situation for a moment. The present situation, where he was holding a gun on a young woman that was, rapidly, driving them toward whatever mad destination

they had been heading to for the entire evening.

“Slow down, damnit!”

“Hey, you wanted me to drive, Tanner. So here we go! Now, where the fuck do we go?”

He thought for a moment. Where were they headed? In the backseat, Pat Ireland had now passed out, Milt Seebaum looked as if he might be on the verge of a coronary, and Tanner still had no idea where he was demanding that Sabrina drive to. He looked down at his watch again. He knew it was still working. But something was incredibly, unbelievably skewed.

“Sabrina. Sabrina!”

“What?”

“W-what time did you meet me?”

“What? What the fuck are you going on about now?”

“I said, I want to know what time we met tonight, Sabrina. Before you blew me. Before you kicked this whole fucking nightmare off. What time was it? Do you know?”

She considered.

“A couple of hours ago, perhaps.”

“No.”

“No. What the fuck do you mean, no? You’re just drunk, that’s all.”

“No, it’s been more, a lot more than a couple of hours Sabrina. I think you know that. Look at the fucking clock on your fucking CD player. It says two a.m. Do you think it should be two a.m.? Do you really fucking think that?”

He pushed the barrel of the gun into her temple. She smiled, swerved erratically, and said, “keep pushing it, mother fucker. I’ll wrap this fucking car around a tree.”

“Tanner, for the love of God, just get us to a hospital. I think I’m gonna be sick. Oh, I wanna go home, Milt! Make them take us home.”

“Jeezus, Pat, you’ve totally regressed. I’m with Tanner. For the first time tonight, I think I’ve realized---”

“You too, Prof?”

Tanner jerked his head around, looked at Milt. The Professor's eyes held a sudden, deep philosophical cast that seemed to swim behind the bloodshot aura of the alcohol.

"Yeah. Big time. I understand now."

Tanner turned to Sabrina viciously, and spat, "Take us to Delcinos! I think I know what this is all about."

The car swerved, throwing them all to the side, and attracting the attention of a parked cruiser that was waiting in the alley between two buildings. Suddenly, lights flared up, a siren wailed into life.

"Don't stop. Don't you fucking stop, for anything."

"Didn't plan on it."

The little girl bounced and rocked in the seat behind her mother, as the car sped through the night. In front of them, Bruce and the stripper he had hired for the night were doing their best to shake the tail. But now it had progressed into a cinema car chase.

"Motherfucker...I'm gonna catch you tonight, if it's the last thing that I do."

Jill Lavender was having a merry good time. Her blood was boiling. She was going to beat the shit out of whoever he was with, then she was going to scratch his eyes out. If that wasn't good enough, she had a pair of scissors in the glove box. One good jab in the testes and even the mighty Bruce McGonnagill might have trouble getting a boner again. She sped up. They turned sharply. She turned. They sped up again, cut down an alley, and she did just the same.

"W-what does your sister want to chase you for?"

Bruce said between nearly-clenched teeth, "She thinks I owe her some money, or something. Has always had this thing about me and chicks that she thinks are loose. I dunno, she's fucking crazy, that's all."

He swerved again, headed back down a sort of rising hill, got back out on to main, and then decided to head for the

university campus. What the fuck. Delcinos would be packed. They could lose her in the crowd.

He started across the bridge, way over the speed limit, and suddenly both cars were being tailed. Lights flared. Sirens wailed.

“Oh shit. Oh fucking shit. No, this can’t be happening.”

The stripper put her head down into her hand, wishing she had never agreed to fuck this guy for dough. Now, they had some crazy bitch and a fucking cop on their tail. And she couldn’t afford to get busted again. Last time, the Boss had had to bail her out, and he made damn sure that every penny of it came out of her ass.

“Don’t worry baby,” said the ever-confident Bruce McGonnagill.

In truth, he was worried, now. A lot worried. He didn’t really, know how he was going to get out of this. He might have been able to shake Jill. But now, if someone didn’t pull over soon, they were all going to be in a lot of trouble.

He could feel his permanent erection begin to deflate, somewhat.

Skimmy was having a ball. He could bounce around in the back all he wanted, and Jill would never see him.

“Skimmy? Skimmy, is mommy going to get in trouble?”

Lindsey sent her thoughts to Skimmy, whose legs dangled off her right shoulder. He considered.

“Probably. But don’t worry, kid. If anything happens to her, I’ll take you to a special place. A place just for special people. A magic place.”

Lindsey could feel a huge swell of grief in her throat, suddenly.

“B-but Skimmy,” she thought. “I don’t want to go to a special place.”

But he didn’t answer her. The car took another swerve, still followed closely by the cop car. Ahead, Bruce was busily trying to figure out how tonight had, suddenly, taken such a bad turn.

The cashier at the pharmacy was a wildly unimpressive young man that looked like he still hadn't lost his virginity. Mary Ann had purchased a box of Trojan lubricated and some chewing gum. She was curious.

"What do you think about ribbed?"

"Ribbed what?"

"Condoms. Do you prefer ribbed, or? I find that ribbed seems to like, *totally* be more satisfying as far as sensation during sex."

She didn't know why she was trying to embarrass him. Maybe it was the shock of red hair. Maybe the freckles.

"I uh, don't usually discuss stuff like that with customers. I guess ribbed would be as good as any. A rubber is a rubber."

"You don't get laid much, do you?"

Oh boy, she thought. She was wired tonight. She was out for blood.

He looked at her for a minute as if he wanted to slap the cold shit out of her. Instead, he said, "Well, to be perfectly honest, no. I haven't had a piece of ass in nigh on a year. What's it to you?"

"Just a guess. Would you like to get laid more often?"

"Sure. Wouldn't everyone? I guess I've never, exactly, been real popular with the ladies."

His self-deprecation was a major turn-off, but she didn't let it faze her. He probably just needed to rack up a few successes, get his confidence going. She leaned over the counter a little. Her cleavage seemed to catch his eye.

"How much?"

He seemed, for a moment, like he didn't know what she was saying.

"Oh, for the condoms. Okay, that will be 5.85"

He was going to put them in a little paper baggie, but she told him to forget it, and slipped them in her purse. She stood

there. The 24 hour pharmacy was quite dead at this late of an hour.

She looked at him. She couldn't say he didn't have any potential. He was sort of cute, in a homely way. In fact, he was the type you sort of felt sorry for, wanted to mother. If he played his cards right, maybe she would give him a sympathy fuck.

"So. What's your name?"

"Dylan."

She looked down. She fancied she could see a bulge begin in the crotch of his jeans.

"You want to get together sometime? Have some fun?"

She drew the words out, suggestively. He was probably about to come in his pants.

She walked out to the parking lot, after exchanging phone numbers. What the hell, if she didn't feel like meeting him again, she didn't have to. That was the way it worked these days, in her world.

She started the car. Now, Delcinos.

The young man with the beard was known around campus for his affable, easy manner and his corny sense of humor. He had a sort of scruffy face, and a dark curly shock of hair that would have been more appropriate in 1977. He was enamored of Bob Dylan. He sometimes played guitar at Open Mic night.

Tonight he was wearing a very obnoxious hat that had two puppet hands on the front. When you pulled a string hanging from the bill, the hands clapped. He had purposely worn it into Delcinos this evening, just to make the girls take notice.

"Hey baby, nice hat."

A tall, shapely young woman in a skimpy outfit walked by him, holding a fresh beer, and sat at a bar stool. The bartender, Sykes, and a little perky assistant manager named Debra, were flying on several different types of over-the-counter speed, and doing their best to keep up with a variety of different drink

orders. The music was pounding.

At a nearby table. Lance and the singer of *Poison Betty* sat, taking in the scenery. It was packed tonight. In fact, they had never seen the University Village area that crowded. The porch out front was spilling over with young, drunk bodies. The night seemed to have no end. It was all about being young, and staying awake forever.

“Hey guys, what the fuck’s up?”

The young man with the clapping-hands hat approached, elevated himself to a stool miraculously, and generally didn’t realize he was not welcome at their table.

The hook-nosed woman looked away. Fucking creep, she thought. He had come on to her before, at a party. She had a serious distaste for his type.

Lance took a swig of beer, said, “ We’re escaping from Kevin Hickman.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, he showed up at the house, unannounced. One of these days I’m going to kill him and be done with it.”

“I’ll help you hide the body.”

He turned, looked at the woman sitting next to him.

“So, uh, how are you doing tonight?”

She frowned. Time to be polite.

“Oh, you know, just trying to have fun.”

He smiled, tried to shake off the subliminal feeling of creeping repulsion she had projected his way, and raised his beer.

“I propose a toast. To the Fall Semester, may it pass quickly.”

“Here, here.”

Lance raised his glass, toasted, pounded back the brew. The hook-nosed woman put her head in her hand, and looked off into the crowd. Talking was almost impossible, over the roar of conversations and pumping music. She wished she had just went home and read a book.

In the kitchen, Gary and Keith had managed to put the

finishing touches on closing down the grill. The buzz was wearing thin, but Gary had an even more apprehensive, more paranoid feeling than ever. Nothing had made sense tonight. What was he doing here? Was this going to be the next ten years of his life?

Every once in awhile, Keith Decker would turn around, look at Gary nervously, and ask him if he was okay, all the time thinking, *that's the last time I ever share a joint with you, fucker.*

But Gary was a trooper. He did what he had to do, despite the heavy, panic feeling in his chest that wouldn't go away.

It would be alright. God was still in his heaven. This was still America. He was still his father's son. He put away the last of the dishes, leaned against the sink, wiped sweat from his brow.

He hadn't bothered to call his girlfriend, figuring she would show up sooner or later. But she hadn't popped in all evening, and she usually did when he was working.

Tonight, everything was, somehow, *wrong.*

Fifteen

There are situations in life that are so comic, absurd, and altogether unconventional, that one hesitates to think of them even happening in the realm of what we consider to be reality. The well-documented coincidences of life are not so fortuitous as we might suspect. Consider the fate of those that were doomed to be in exactly the wrong place at the wrong time. Like the people who just happened to be crossing the University of Texas campus when Charles Whitman decided to climb to the top of the bell tower and open fire. Or the people doomed to die in the blazing inferno of the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001.

It is as if God decides, even in the face of all better logic, that some people are just doomed to the tragic fate that they suffer arbitrarily, while others, perhaps less-qualified humans altogether, are spared for reasons that we find wholly inexplicable.

Such was the case on that strange night when life at the U.C.U campus was torn completely asunder for anyone that happened to get caught into the cyclone sweep of events that culminated in so much tragedy.

To fully understand the situation as it played itself out, it is important to understand the order of events as they transpired, and to examine the way in which, if fate had played it out somewhat differently, such tragedies as the mass-murder of young people who were so unfortunate to choose Delcinos to be the place they opted to spend that particular Saturday night could and can, henceforth, be avoided. Or, at the very least, understood.

But it is a mesmerizing, unlikely set of events; a true comedy of errors on all parts. A great fuck of the order of logical events. It must not happen again.

To begin with, the truck that was speedily being chased by the car that was being driven by Jill Lavender that was being pursued by Officer Josh Tilden, was doing over twice the legal speed limit. The officer, having already radioed for help, was now being accompanied by another squad car, in hot pursuit.

As they approached the University campus, they were met with increased, and erratic traffic, some of which, apparently, had not counted on having to pull over to keep out of the way of the speeding caravan. The campus area, to be specific, was a lot of little intersecting streets and crossways, and tonight, of all nights, it was decidedly busy, with creeping cars cruising around every corner.

It was, approximately three miles from the Delcinos Bar and Grill when the accident (which, if it had transpired differently, could have, ironically, managed to save the soul of the little girl that crouched, terrified, behind her mother's front seat) occurred. We claim it *could have* transpired differently, we can't be sure about a great many things concerning that night. Shakespeare wrote, "like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us just for sport."

Yes. Certainly, he knew wherefore he spoke, particularly in

regard to this tragic situation.

It was on the side street that ran between a corner bar called Speakeasy, and a Village Pantry, that a marauding gang of drunken young frat brothers would totally demolish the hot car that had been provided them out of the easy and free bank account of the driver's lawyer father. The father had used his expertise and connections to rescue his son from legal troubles on two separate occasions. Well, third time was a charm.

It was drunken idiocy that ignored the stop sign. It was Newtonian physics that demanded the ensuing collision. It was a spinning, totaled cop car that got them all arrested. It was a gift from the gods that let the two cars in front speed ahead, and avoid capture.

In the backseat, a sudden jolt had caused Lindsey to hit the back of her cranium against the lower part of the driver's seat door. Lindsey, who had never before in her life experienced any sort of head trauma, was instantly knocked cold. Jill was still unaware of her presence. Jill was doing sixty in a thirty, with her teeth gritted in anger.

"Oh shit! Oh fucking shit! Did you see that?"

The young prostitute put her face in her hands. She could envision months in jail, being drooled over by bull dykes, fresh meat. She hated jail worse than she hated being broke, being dumped, being.

"Yeah I fucking saw that! Yeah. It was fucking great. We're home free."

"Let me the fuck out of here! I'm walking home! You're fucking crazy! You're gonna get me fucking busted again!"

Bruce turned, put out his hand, and slapped her as hard as he possibly could.

"Shut the fuck up! I already paid, and I'm getting my money's worth."

He sped up. Another few blocks and he was home free. Then, it would be out to the country. To fuck. And fuck. And drop this bitch off and let her walk fifty miles back to town, if she

gave him any lip.

A man like Bruce McGonnagill knew how to deal with these situations.

At exactly the same moment, by the decree of God and whatever black angels policed the various and sundry frequencies of the span of human existence, Kyle and Darren were prowling the streets downtown, trying to work up the same sense of utter resilient fury that had birthed their hideous plan from the beginning.

They had seen a truck, a little foreign model car, and two cop cars chasing each other like flies chase a shit wagon, while they had been camped out in an alley, loading their guns and making all the necessary preparations that would ensure a maximum kill count. They had studied their terrain. They knew their business. It was all a matter of a few more minutes, a quick goodbye, a way to look at what they knew must necessarily be their last moments on earth.

“Jesus...are we being chased?”

“Let’s avoid them if at all possible. Are you fucking ready? It’ll take ten minutes from here.”

Darren breathed in. Darren breathed out. His pulse was pounding. His head was swimming. Suddenly, he was sure that he must be dreaming this.

“Yeah. I love you Kyle. Only for you, man.”

“Only for you.”

They leaned over and kissed. One last kiss. Judas had set the standard, long ago.

Then, they headed out of the alley. On the CD player, a song from Slayer.

It was “Altar of Sacrifice”, from the EP *Reign in Blood*.

And it was time.

Tanner, Sabrina, Milt, and Patricia had dealt with the cop as best they could. But it was apparent that Sabrina was a master at manipulation. And, also, was highly proficient at passing roadside sobriety tests.

When they had finally pulled over, the gun being hastily hidden under the seat, the cop had been irate. But Sabrina had simply explained that she had mistakenly hit the gas when he had turned on his lights, and that the car was a soused-up model. It was delicate. The cop looked slightly less-than-convinced.

“Officer, I am like so sorry about this. I am the designated driver for the night. Haven’t had a drop myself. I just kind a panicked when I saw you, and though I meant to pull over...I guess my foot hit the accelerator by accident.”

“Yeah. Well, miss, I’m going to have to ask you to take a roadside sobriety test. Could you please step out of the car, miss.”

Oh great, thought Tanner. Here goes.

Sabrina stepped casually out of the driver’s seat. She stood, facing the officer. She smiled. She had been through this before.

“Now, tilt your head back, put your hands out, and touch the tip of your nose.”

Tanner sat in the front seat, shaking. He wanted to get to Delcinos. He HAD to get there. The knowledge was pounding in his brain harder than all the alcohol he had drank that evening.

She did it expertly.

“Okay. Well. You see this yellow line?”

“You mean the road line, sir?”

“Yeah,” he said, clearly missing the sarcasm.

“And?... ”

“Walk that line, Miss.”

“Um, yes sir.”

He shined his light down on her feet. She walked the line flawlessly. Back, and forth. Back, and forth. The cop looked like he might shit brass Twinkies. It was, apparently, their night.

“Okay...um, if you could step back here with me a

minute.”

“Oh, um okay. In your car?”

“Yeah.”

Tanner could not believe it. It defied any and all scientific logic. He was beginning to wonder if, perhaps, Sabrina was not the living, breathing daughter of the Prince of Darkness.

She opened the passenger-side door, and the cop scooted in next to her. Several dozen cars drove by slowly, and ogled, as cars are wont to do when they are driving and see that somebody has been pulled over for not being a responsible driver. Tanner looked back. He could see Sabrina blowing into a breathalyzer. Milt said, “Well, I don’t know how in the fuck she managed to walk the line, but she’s dead meat now. Tanner, if I didn’t think that we would, somehow, all be hauled off to the slammer I would tell that cop exactly what is going on.”

“Don’t do that man. Not yet. Milt, do you know what you told me earlier? While we were in the bar?”

He looked for a minute at Patricia Ireland. Patricia, who had passed the point of being a nuisance, had clammed up suddenly, and was staring out the window coughing in a near sob.

“Oh Milt. What happened? What happened to make tonight so...fucking...”

“Crazy? Patricia, if you hadn’t insisted we come along, we wouldn’t be involved in all this. Now, we just witnessed that young lady back there shoot a man. In cold blood. Do you know what that could do to our careers? Our lives?”

He suddenly looked at Tanner.

“Tanner, if she comes back to the car, you will have her drive us somewhere safe...somewhere near my apartment. Won’t you?”

He looked desperate beyond desperate. Tanner, who had by now already figured out, or so he thought, the entire situation, turned and said,

“Yes. Of course. I’ll take care of this. I started this, and I’ll be the one to finish it. But, Prof, you never answered the question

I asked you. Remember what you asked me, about how you thought this might be some kind of dream?”

He looked blank for a moment, then said:

“Yeah...oh yeah. I told you I thought that I had been dreaming.”

Tanner looked as sincere as it was possible for him too.

“Sir, Milt, Prof...we are dreaming. None of this is real. We’ve, or maybe I should say, *I have invented this all...*”

“You’re fucking losing it, Tanner,” Patricia Ireland croaked. She had sat up, and was looking more sober, more altogether herself. She also looked drowned in despair, and like she had a splitting migraine.

“Am I? Am I fucking losing it? How many people can shoot someone with silent gunfire, huh? How many? How about this entire fucking night? How long has it been? How long have we been together tonight? What the fuck has happened to time?”

“Shh! You don’t want to attract...”

Tanner lowered his voice. Sabrina was still sitting with the cop. They seemed to be in a heated discussion, of some sort.

Patricia said, “If you’re right...Tanner. If this is your dream, or nightmare, or whatever...then it must be a lucid dream. Or some kind of psychic state. And you’ve brought us in.”

Her voice was the dragging of tires, but he knew she was sobering up.

“This has been the fucking longest night of my life.”

Milt put his face in his hands, his elbows resting on his long legs.

“Really Milt? Check your watch. According to your watch, it’s only been four hours.”

Mary Ann had pulled into the parking lot of Delcinos, had made sure to lock the door. Punk rock kids were skateboarding in the parking lot, completely ignoring the “no skateboarding” signs that had been posted and defaced all over campus. Well, she

thought, God bless the icky bastards. At least they have the balls to do what they want.

She took one last look at herself in the rear-view mirror, fixed her lipstick, and pulled down her skirt. She was showing a lot of leg.

But that's good. He'll want that. All men are pigs, so...

She clicked across the parking lot in stiletto heels, walked around the corner, past small groups of college freshman with their first taste of campus party life still stewing in their guts at 2:00 a.m. It was almost time for that final round. It was time to get busy.

The patio was still swinging. Management must have left it open. Normally, it would have been closed by now, the chairs taken in, the tables stacked. The streets, though, had already started to clear out a bit. Apparently Quad Bash was coming to it's annual end.

She walked around the front and flashed her ID.

"No cover."

She blew the doorman a kiss, and entered, walking around in the crowd for a minute. Damn. The place looked like it was about a hundred warm bodies over-capacity.

She had taken some cheap speed, to get her sex drive going overtime. Ephedrine always made her a jubilant, sexual animal.

It also made her extremely edgy. She looked around for Beth.

Where the fuck was she?

It might be helpful, at this point, to explain the unique, L-shaped architecture that was a part of the entire Delcinos experience. It aided and abetted the disaster that was shortly to follow.

The entrance looked out on what was, during the day, the no-smoking section of the dining room. It was a collection of heavy tables lining a long section of tall windows that faced the bar, and between the windows and the bar, a selection of shorter

tables. The Bar was a sort of thick, wooden semi-circle, lined by benches, and directly behind was the waitress station, complete with average waitress-station paraphernalia, such as glasses, silverware, bus tubs, and the regulation window where steaming plates of Delcines-brand sit down fast food was thrust through. To the extreme left of this was the ungodly-heavy, swinging, kitchen door.

There were several wall-mounted TV sets, a sound-system and stage Kati-cornered to the bar, and on the far side, separated by a wooden partition a few video games and several more booths. The restrooms were back there, also.

In the men's room, a very shady little girl in a flowery dress that looked like it could have been ripped off a half-naked body at Woodstock, was camped out in a stall with her dread-locked boyfriend, Beau. They were passing amongst a circle of friends and strangers a very powerful, very good joint.

"Hey man, party down, what the fuck..."

She passed the joint to Beau, and put out an incredibly skinny arm to embrace a girlfriend that had just come into the stall to join them.

The girl, a svelte tom-boy creature that was inordinately beautiful, was intoxicated, typically, in almost exact proportion to her own meager body weight. She worked in a massage parlor. She had corn-yellow hair, the slimmest, most wonderful hips, and a pleasant flower child way about her. She wore large, knitted caps.

Tanner, who had met her several months ago at a house party, had been, oddly, instantly, taken with her. He had wandered into the party at the behest of a friend, certain that someone who was as overworked as himself deserved an evening of house-party frolic. He had walked in, had had little room to move considering the press of warm bodies in and out, and had been terrified the entire evening that the DEA were going to bust the door down.

A central room of the small house had been reserved for a

circle of pot smokers, a sort of standing, communal circle. The marijuana was a thick, tangible presence that curled through the room like a slithering serpent. Tanner managed to get several cups from the keg outside. That eased him. That really eased him.

The rooms filled up, the rooms thinned, strangers came in, partook of weed, booze, whatever, then mysteriously vanished. Did the walls eat them alive? Were they merely an hallucination? Tanner still was not sure.

He had sat down in a big, fluffy chair, looking at flower children girls dance to the accompaniment of Bob Marley and eighth-generation Grateful Dead clones.

She had come up to him, her little lithe body enticing him in his inebriated state. She held a single stick of incense as if it was a sacred flower. It was an incredibly Hindu sentiment.

But she had drank herself to oblivion within a few hours. She was forced upstairs. Following her, unbeknownst to Tanner, were her roommate and her roommates...boyfriend? Lover? One night stand?

Tanner was drunk. He stumbled up the stairs after them, his feet defying gravity, each step threatening to bring him plummeting back downward, toward a broken neck. Here, that would be fatal. Here, ambulances were unknown. This was not your daddy's Western World.

There was a slight step-off at the top of the stairs. Tanner found himself confronted by two different doors. It was like the decision between the red and green pill. Take the red pill, we go home, we sleep it off, we forget about the nightmare. Take the green pill, and we see reality exposed in it's naked, ugly horror. We wake up, surrounded by bloodthirsty aliens, hungering for dimensional juice, seeking to suck the liver and spleen of fertile human soul-meat.

But Tanner, after a lifetime of bad luck, was not lucky enough to take the red pill. No red pill here. He couldn't have just walked into a closet and passed out, no. God had to expose Tanner, bring him out into the naked sunlight, with his sagging

elephant-flesh exposed to the critique of the flapping gums of mother nature's normal progeny. And what progeny.

He had liked that little tom-boy, had thought she had a soul as incandescent as a burning flame. And was he the moth? Would she, in her equally drunken state, accept the florid sloppy kisses of a raving Tanner, who had followed her upstairs in a torrid passionate fervor to have but one warm willowy wiry embrace from the tawny young lass?

Instead, he felt like he had just walked into the darkened precinct of some bad euro-porn flick that got major hits on that vast web of unconsciousness referred to as the World Wide Internet. His angel, his hippie cherub, his scrubby Juliet was defiling her wanton form with not only her roommate, but her roommate's boyfriend, another young blackguard, and several other people watching and participating in various and sundry combinations of lewd unseemliness. Even the man in the clown suit seemed to have lost all sense of decency and righteousness. And, what was worse, they were doing it with the lights on, in full view of the dog.

The dog.

Tanner had never seen a human-being shape-shift before, and considering the free-flow of hallucinogens that had been hitherto available, he was not sure, in fact, if he was actually seeing it now. But *he was seeing it*. A room full of orgiastic depravity suddenly transformed itself, one image clicking over another, until the entire room was nothing but a vast spawning ground of gyrating, thrusting, orgasmic lizard-types. The sound was something akin to the moans of the damned and desolate that are said to emit from the gates of Hell itself.

Suddenly, an all-too-human foot was thrust back from the hard-wood floor. Tanner gasped. It had been severed at the ankle.

"By God---*your all damned cannibals too!*" He blurted.

It had been a mistake. The illusion shifted, the wave-patterns and psychic frequencies were re-aligned in accordance with the grid-reality of the agreed-upon illusion.

A young male bounded off the bed (where his Juliet and her roommate lay sprawled in heathen fashion) spat at Tanner angrily, pushed his chest, and slammed the door. Tanner stumbled drunkenly at the top of the stairs, unsure of what, exactly, he had been a witness too. And, truthfully, he never did reason it out.

Mary Ann made her way around the wooden partition, looked around in the crowd, and let out an inward shriek. Oh, this was rich. Oh, this was just fucking great.

There he sat. The boy-type. The horny dickhead. The guy she wanted to bag like yesterday's groceries. And she found Beth too, except Beth was one of the biggest bitches walking, and before the evening was over, Mary Ann would prove that. Backstabbing cunt. Jealous, petty, bitch.

Mary Ann pounded her way past the pool tables to the booth that was only occupied by Beth and, oh, what's-his-name...she struggled to remember. From the looks of it, they had been getting real chummy, real quick. Mary Ann was sure his big, strong masculine hand was probably moving, from Beth's bony little knee and traveling to a firm docking bay halfway up her ass. They were both doing the hard, horny stare-down, the same look that usually preceded the knocking boots.

She stood over them for a second before they even realized that she was there. Beth suddenly turned, smiled a shit-eating grin, as if to say, 'look bitch, I don't know what the fuck you had planned, but I have just made a major score in about thirty minutes or so, so there.'

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Her voice was so sedate, so exasperatedly calm, that Mary Ann actually surprised herself. But her blood was pumping. Furious. Furious. Now she had a vision of shooting nails from her teeth.

"I...uh, well, how do I explain this, Rod..."

"Uh, Todd."

“Yeah...*right*, you’re Todd. Oh, God, you’re *gorgeous*...”

Beth was already fucking plastered. Mary Ann could tell. The bitch was pronouncing all her s sounds the wrong way. Making an inflection as if every s word was going to mutate into some bizarre adaptation of the word *shit*. *So* was *show*. *Gorgeous* was *gorjushbbh*...It really made her *shkein* crawl.

Mary Ann lost it.

“Why-in-the-fuck-did-you-invite-me-here?”

Beth goggled. Todd looked as if he was mildly amused. Hmm. Two babes fighting over him. Not bad. But why should they fight when there was plenty of him to share?

He started to say something to this effect, but was cut-off suddenly:

“You’re always doing this kind of shit to me, Beth. And I’m fucking sick of it. I’m, I’m...you fucking bitch. You fucking bitch...I could rip your goddamned eyes out.”

Beth smiled, giggled, looked arrogantly superior, and started to rise from the booth slightly. She sat back down, for a moment too scared of the confrontation. But the alcohol was rising to her brain. What right did fucking Mary Ann have to be a bitch tonight? How often did *she* have a night like tonight, when the most gorgeous man in the bar was all over her? She had sat like a third wheel herself, plenty of times.

“Okay bitch, if you want to step to this shit.”

“Oh, you’re gonna try to be all bad now?”

“Hey fuck you , bitch, I could kick your fat ass around the block!”

Suddenly, the two women were upon each other, ripping hair, scratching eyes, screeching like banshees. Mary Ann clearly had the upper hand. She was speeding like a train, had a foot on the opposition, and was as mad as hell.

People moved out of the way, crowded around, and started placing bets. Mary Ann slammed Beth into a video game up against the back wall. Someone alerted the bouncers that there was a cat fight.

Vicious profanity was uttered, yelled, hissed, laughed, shrieked, groaned, moaned, and threatened. Beth had a wonderful, fresh claw mark across her face, and Mary Ann was struggling with one of the bouncers. Beth leapt forward, ready to make another attack at the enemy, now that she had been subdued. A large male that had recently paroled from Michigan City Prison stepped forward, grabbed arms, not in the manner in which he had been trained, but in the manner he knew afforded him the greatest tactile sensations available from holding a drunken, violent, wriggling female body. He smiled, liking his new job.

There was only one problem. With him and his co-worker busy getting things under control, the door was not being guarded. ID's were not being checked. Why, *anybody* could slip in in the next few minutes. And that could lose them their liquor license.

Anybody.

They shushed as the staccato rhythm of Sabrina's boots tick-ticked back along the road, and the lanky young woman popped open the door.

"I can't believe it...she fucking blew zeros."

Patricia Ireland sounded like she had just woken up after major surgery. Her voice was a combination of gravel and dragging rubber.

"Honey," said Sabrina turning, smiling. "That's not all I blew."

Tanner suddenly dove down, and searched frantically under the seat. He dove back up.

"Looking for this?"

Sabrina held up the gun. That. Tanner. Had. Just. Hidden.

"It's---"

"Not possible? I know, Tanner. I can't fucking figure it out either."

The cop pulled out first, and drove away quickly. Sabrina was next. She was even quicker.

Bruce sped through the University Village, certain now that the evening was his. All danger had been dealt with by the hands of fate. Behind him, Jill Lavender still pursued with full intent of hacking his drunken nuts off. But what did he care? As long as he wasn't going to jail.

He passed the coffee shop. Book store. Pizza place.

Boom! Crunch!

Suddenly, the truck exploded. Thick tendrils of smoke started wafting up from beneath the hood. He sputtered to a slow crawl, able just to steer it to the nearest parking lot. Right in back of fucking Delcines. She was one stop light behind him.

Now, she would catch him. Now, he and his whore would go on foot. Now, the jig was fucking up, for sure.

He had read a book once, had Bruce McGonnagill. It had had some line in it, some piece of poetry that had always stuck with him. Something about *things falling apart*.

He had known from birth that his luck was shit. Oh well, you just got use to it after awhile.

"That's it motherfucker, I am *so* out of here."

The hooker grabbed up her purse furiously, opened the door, and flew out, still cursing. Bruce caught her shoulder, expertly, with one huge, rough hand.

"If you split now, baby, I might decide to call in an anonymous tip about your place of employment. A place of prostitution. I bet your boss would be real happy about that, wouldn't he?"

She turned her head back, and for an instant he thought she actually bought it. Then a vicious pain exploded on his knuckles.

She had sank her teeth into them.

"You fucking bitch!"

She bolted, losing her heels, ran across the lot, and was gone into the night. He stood there, knuckles smarting. He had

wasted an entire paycheck on that bitch. He had nothing to show for it.

He sat, half in and half out of the truck, one long leg dangling out to the pavement. Jill would pull in any minute. She had seen which way he had gone. His truck was shot to shit. It was still smoking. Well, be damned if he would just sit out here and let her find him sulking. To start a fight. The Mother of all Domestic Difficulties. To call him the bastard that he knew he was. To castrate him.

He slid out of the cab, slammed the door of his piece-of-shit truck, and walked across the lot and around to the front entrance. The patio, for goddamn sake, was still full. Odd. This was definitely fucking party night. Morning.

Not for me, he thought, with the bitter realization that life meant no joys for him. No joys whatsoever.

And there was no one waiting at the door, either. Odd.

She pulled into the parking lot with a screech, saw the truck, smoke billowing out of the hood and laughed, ferociously, to herself. So the mother fucker had had to ditch his truck, huh? All the better. He must have taken that bitch and went inside Delcinos. It was time to even the score.

She drove back out front, and parked behind the coffee house adjacent to Delcinos. The party on the enclosed bar patio next door was still hopping. Somebody asked her if she went both ways.

She walked across the street as quickly as she could. On this side, the patio in front of Delcinos was still packed to capacity. It was a rare night, even on the U.C.U. Campus.

Quad Bash. First of the year. Everyone got stinking drunk, and fucked each other silly. It was like some sort of obscure religious rite that had been handed out by convenient extraterrestrial visitors at the dawn of the human age. Or, well, maybe it was all just part of “college life”. She didn’t know, and right now, she didn’t give a fuck.

She approached the door, saw no doorman, decided she wouldn't pay a cover even if he had insisted, and walked in.

Several large masses of people were shuffling around a catfight that had started just a second or two earlier. Two bimbettes were busily being held down by burly, sweaty, meaty bouncers. The kind of men that were regulation dickheads. The kind of men she liked.

She walked through the crowd. Was he taking a piss? Sorry bastard. She wanted to rip some flesh herself this evening.

Suddenly, there he was, sitting beyond the melee at a little booth that he had all to his lonesome. Unless that bitch was taking a piss. She also noticed he hadn't bought a beer. He had already blown all his dough.

Good.

It would all add fuel to the fire.

She bumped and pushed her way through drunken college kids, until she could make her way to the back booth. It was time.

Lindsey came to a few moments later. Mommy had left the car. It was all dark. She was very scared.

Suddenly, Skimmy appeared on the seat above her.

"You can get up now Lindsey. In fact, you better. We have to go in there and help mommy."

She rubbed her head, and began to crawl up onto the back seat. She sat for a moment next to Skimmy, and felt like weeping. Even with the doors closed and the windows rolled up, she could hear the noise all around her. The noise of older kids, partying and listening to loud music. The noise of yelling and shrieking and laughing. It sounded like a war was going on outside.

"Skimmy...I'm afraid." In fact, she was petrified. What would mommy do, when she saw that Lindsey had acted like some stowaway kid in a pirate story, and come with her out to get Bruce?

Skimmy smiled. His teeth looked like black little stumps.

He said, “No reason at all to be afraid, darling. I swear by my own beard that you’re gonna be okay. I’ll be with you. Ain’t nothing to worry about.”

She began to sniffle.

“You promise?”

“Of course. Have I ever lied to you? Now, just follow me.”

Skimmy turned, and jumped through the closed car door. She frowned. She hated it when he did that sort of thing. It always gave her the creeps.

She could hear people behind the big wooden fence to her left. They sounded kind of stupid, like they had been drinking, and that scared her, because she knew drunk people often did things that they wouldn’t do under normal circumstances. She hated drunk people, badly.

Skimmy appeared again, right in front of her, and began to run across the very dark parking lot to the road, where it was brighter. He had an oh-so excited look on his face.

He looked back over his shoulder as he ran, and waved his arm.

“C’mon, we’ll be late!”

Late for what?, she thought, but followed as quick as she could, not wanting to be alone outside.

And, miraculously, nobody seemed to notice a little girl in an old nightgown running, unattended, into a bar at two in the morning.

Some people are just all about themselves.

Sabrina drove calmly, steadily, through the streets, and that was okay, because now Tanner knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that tonight had been pre-ordained. It was as if reality was slipping as comfortably into the well-worn glove of last night’s nightmare as if it had been tailor-made to suit him. There was an awesome quiet in the car, and all seemed to share, at the same time, the same vision. It had settled over them, silently,

magnificently, beckoning them onward, in an awesome, frightening sense.

Now, Milt had stopped asking if they could be taken home, or dropped off anywhere in between. Now, it was as if he had resigned himself, for unspecific reasons, to simply see the rest of the situation through, to whatever end may be in store.

Patricia put her encircled her arm with his. She was looking dead ahead now, barely cognizant of the streetlights and scenery as it whizzed by. They had all been put under hypnosis, it seemed.

“Milt?” She asked.

“Yes, Patricia?”

Pause.

“Do you like me? I mean, do you really, really like me?”

Her voice was stone-cold sober. She was not kidding, not being paranoid. She was simply asking him a very easy, serious, sobering question.

“Yes Patricia,” he stated flatly. “I like you very, very much. If we make it out of this in one piece, I have a proposal. Let’s get married.”

She was silent.

“Are you serious?”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life, I’m afraid.”

She stared straight ahead. No change of expression.

“Then, I accept your proposal, Milt. I think you’ll make a good husband.”

Tanner, his eyes watering heavily, his skin a strange series of electrical prickles, turned and looked at them, asking, “So you guys feel it to?”

They both nodded, and Milt murmured, “I think, young man, I may have just regained my sense of the uncanny. I had lost it for quite sometime.”

“There’s a spirit in here with us,” Patricia stated flatly.

Tanner turned suddenly, shocked. He looked at Sabrina. Her face had taken on a terrifying new caste. It had, somehow, subtly altered. She didn’t look like Sabrina anymore, but

she was. She looked like an android, more than anything. She was The *Sabrinator*.

He didn't ask her anything. He was sure she wouldn't answer.

He leaned back in his seat, and dreaded the familiar sites of the U.C.U. Village. He closed his eyes, and began to pray.

Jill walked over to Bruce, who was sitting with his head down. He looked as if he might leave here and put the barrel of a shotgun into his mouth. It made her want to puke.

"Hey ugly, guess who?"

He looked up. His eyes looked tired, but suddenly flared up into a ready, angry response.

"You fucking bastard," she murmured, but over the general din, he couldn't really make out what she was saying. Without saying one word, she took her long nails and laid into his face. Suddenly, they were struggling.

The bouncers, who had just, barely, managed to separate Beth and Mary Ann, now had an additional problem. Somebody had to go and get Gary, and have him call the cops.

Strong young men standing in the crowd made an effort to separate Jill and Bruce, but it was turning into a total circus at Delcinos, and, as short-handed as they were there was little they could do to quiet things down until they got some outside help.

Bruce struggled in the arms of a tall black man who could, easily, have benched him. But a few slick moves, and Bruce turned, around, popped the young man in the face and suddenly, had more than one fight to contend with. People began to slide out of their seats. Some people left, quietly, expecting police. Some people joined in drunkenly. Some just staggered, mug in hand, and wondered, shaking their drunken heads.

The Bartender and an assistant manager named Debra looked out across the floor, and knew from what he could see that it was getting awful damn hairy for as late as it was.

He stopped what he was doing for a moment, turned, told Debra to watch the front, and walked back into the kitchen, Gary had been wiping the same spot for twenty minutes. They had been finished an hour ago, and Keith Decker had already left.

“Hey, Gare, we got a situation brewing out here. Several people fighting.”

Oh shit, great, just what I need, he thought. His boss never liked it when the cops had to be called. Said it made the place look like a dive, and why the hell couldn't the bouncers deal with it and get any situation under control? That was why he paid them.

Gary took a long, shuddering breath. Nothing, tonight, had been right.

“Okay, get on the phone. Tell them we need them to send an officer down. Hell, tell ‘em we need a whole fucking unit. Ask them if we can get National Guard back-up, while you’re at it.”

Sykes looked at Gary for a minute, as if to say, *Gare, c’mon, man. It’s starting to sound like you hate your job. What is that you’re always saying about being a team player?*”

But he said, “okay.” He pivoted, walked out the kitchen door, and out past the door. Several people on the patio had their noses pressed against the window, trying to see inside. Sykes walked out into the crowd a little. Several intervening friends were busily trying to stand between the various factions, and now Beth Margraves looked as if she had calmed down to the point of just sitting on the floor in a heap crying, holding her bleeding face, while the new bouncer they had just hired still struggled with Mary Ann. It looked like the shit might, finally, be settling down.

Or, he thought, it might be the calm before the storm. And who knew how bad that bitch’s face really was. She had put some napkins to it, and they already looked like a sopping mess of red. He could see that even from here, through the haze and confusion. Shit, she would probably need stitches.

On the far side of the room, several people did their best to hold Jill and Bruce apart, and the black man that Bruce had punched was being cautioned by his fellow frat brothers not to get

back out of hand.

But it was the kind of thing that could flare up again at any minute.

He groaned, turned, headed for the stairs, and completely missed the tiny frame of Lindsey Lavender move through the unguarded front door.

Skimmy preceded her, walking off into the crowd, looking up very short skirts, happy as a clam. But Lindsey, upon seeing the noise and confusion, ducked under a table in terror. Way back in the dark, in a puddle of spilt beer. Legs that looked like massive tree trunks seemed to surround her on every side.

Sykes went up to the office, sat down at Gary's messy desk, and heaved a tremendous sigh before picking up the phone and speed-dialing the police dept. He would tell them to take their time. Last call was in twenty-minutes, and it looked like it was, actually, calming down and beginning to thin out downstairs. No hurry.

No real emergency.

Darren and Kyle walked easily to the entrance, expecting to have to shoot someone right off the mark. The guns were hidden in the folds of their trench coats, flat against their bodies, and they had spare clips in the pockets. Everything was in readiness.

It was a bonus to find the security force temporarily detained.

Sabrina pulled up along the south-side of the street. She got out, hurried to the kitchen door, and Tanner followed.

Milt waited for a moment, and he and Patricia followed. It was not a question of fear anymore. The feeling was driving them onward. The next few moments happened in a strange, soundless slow-motion that Milt Seebaum would never forget for the rest of his life.

Sabrina opened the door, rushed inside, and Gary, for a moment, didn't know what to say. Was that one of the new

waitresses? He started to yell at her as the door to the front swung closed.

Tanner rushed through the backdoor. Gary was still standing stupefied over the sink. At the sight of Tanner, his face went slack with surprise.

“Tanner. You fucking asshole...why are you here? You’re fired.”

“I know.”

Tanner pushed out the kitchen door, nearly ran into the assistant manager, and was greeted with a cry of, “hey watch it buddy.” Gary was right behind him, and behind Gary, Milt and Patricia.

The bouncers were busy on the other side of the bar, trying to break up what had escalated into a hair-pulling, eye-scratching evening. The entrance was not being watched.

Suddenly, Tanner saw two distinctive figures enter the bar, one after the other. Instantly, someone cried out:

“Hey, those guys are carrying---”

The staccato sound of gunfire erupted, and it was followed by a chorus of bloodcurdling screams. Tables overturned, beer glasses exploded, the windows shattered outward like curtains of chipped ice. People either ran drunkenly for the farthest exit, or fell to the ground. Outside, several people lay bleeding over patio tables, the party having come to an abrupt end.

People began to stampede each other. Bruce had ducked under a table, with his heart in his teeth, and pulled the body of Jill under the table with him. She was unconscious, bleeding profusely, her hair a mass of red.

Lindsey screamed, her heart pounding in her chest. She started forward out of impulse on her hands and knees. Around her, mammoth legs and flying feet threatened to come down upon her with killing, crushing intensity. Bullets whizzed over her head. She desperately wanted to find her mommy, and couldn’t.

Without thinking, Sabrina raised her own gun, fired twice at one of the black clad shapes, and killed Kyle Erickson.

It had been a damn fine shot in the side of his black hair. He seemed to recoil in shock, fly back, and dropped, his gun clattering to the floor halfway beneath his bleeding body. She dove behind the bar as bullets ripped through the wooden counter, decimating it, alcohol flooding out onto the floor from blasted bottles and punctured kegs.

The young man with the clapping hands hat had caught his between the eyes. Blood and brain matter splattered in a torrential spray, soaking Lindsey's white night gown, soaking the floor, soaking everything within reach. The little girl crawled through the sickening grue; kicked, stepped on, ignored. She barely avoided a body dropping on her. Up ahead, the farthest exit had been blocked by a bottleneck of panicked people in flight. Pandemonium reigned; devils danced in cinders. It was the hour of bloodshed.

Tanner realized that Sabrina and himself were the only ones left cowering behind the bar. Milt and Patricia had ran back into the kitchen when the first shots rang out. Gary was nowhere in sight.

Gary had followed Debra out the kitchen through the back immediately. He ran down the street to a phone booth, but it wasn't necessary. He could already hear the sirens wailing in the distance.

Click, click, click.

Hub?

"What the fuck! What the fuck! Aw shit!"

Suddenly, miraculously, Darren's AK had jammed, and he threw it down angrily. He reached in the waistband of his pants, and pulled out a handgun. Kyle was twitching in a puddle on the floor. Fuck him. This was Darren's time to shine.

He noticed, coming out of his adenoChrome ecstasy for one crystal moment, that the building was now entirely surrounded by flashing lights.

Sabrina stood and fired, having re-loaded from her purse, laying on the floor, with trembling fingers. Simultaneously, Darren

ducked, fired, and was hit in the left shoulder. Sabrina jerked backward for a moment, and Tanner, who had tried to crawl back to the kitchen on a floor littered with shards of broken glass and spraying beer, suddenly turned, saw the young woman blown back, blood splattered down from a wound in her chest.

She seemed to fall through space in one beautiful, slow-motion moment made for the movies. Tanner felt time stop on the head of a pin. He also realized he was temporarily deafened.

She lay, as beautiful a creature in death as she was in life. Darren Rawlings had crumpled to both knees, badly wounded. He put his own gun in his mouth.

“Goodbye fuckers.”

It was the final shot. Tanner felt his body jump at that last concussive blast. It was done.

“Freeze!”

Suddenly, several cops were seen to swarm inside, pointing their guns, poised in defensive stances . It was hilarity compounded upon absurdity. Tanner cradled Sabrina in his arms. He noticed, for the first time, that his watch had started working again.

He shook incessantly, not noticing the sun come up. Later, sedated, lying on a stretcher, he began to realize that his life as Tanner Benjamin had been dissolved in only five hours.

He didn't know it then, but Lindsey Lavender had survived. One might wonder, if they hadn't shown up when they did, if Sabrina hadn't killed Kyle Erickson, if one thing in the whole catastrophe had been different, if Lindsey would even be alive today.

But then, with her mother dead, with the mental agony she suffered for years afterward, that fact did not always seem to be a blessing to her.

Seventeen

Tanner had been taken to a psychiatric unit, where he convalesced for approximately two weeks. Then, upon discharge, he was arrested.

Jail had not been the nightmare that he thought it would be. He had a cell all to himself, three hots a day, and was kept in a kind of protective isolation. What the hell, he thought, he had been freaking out for the last seventy-two hours on and off, and nobody wanted to be responsible for a suicide, or something.

He was grilled mercilessly by a homicide detective named Dan Simmons, but it didn't amount to much. There was no proof, really, that he had been anything but a legitimate hostage through the entire ordeal. After the fifth day, and two interviews without any legal representation whatsoever, he was released without being charged with anything.

"But, stick around, Tanner...we may have to talk again."

Detective Dan had a big, boyish face and just enough of a good build left to him to make him handsome in that mid-forty's manner that all-American plainclothes cops sometimes are. He had very red arms that must have had roughly the tensile strength of iron bands. Tanner was always slightly afraid that Detective Dan was going to whip out a nightstick and clobber the shit out of him. His voice was cultured, slightly-accented Midwest. He sometimes got very loud, unexpectedly.

Dan Simmons had assumed the only thing that he could: that Sabrina Sabrina had been Tanner's girlfriend. Tanner maintained, of course, the truth: that he had not met her before last Saturday night, and that he had plenty of people that could back that up.

The security camera that had taped the whole damn thing had shown, clearly, that Sabrina had done all the shooting. Tanner told them everything that had happened that whole long, miserable night, and even as he related it, his hands shaking, his

voice cracking, he could tell that the cops couldn't quite wrap their cop-logic around any of it. It was too improbable a situation. It was something for a novel.

What wasn't improbable was the final death toll: it stood at seven, with seven critically wounded, and that didn't include the three men that Sabrina had gunned down even before the bar massacre in which she, in turn, had been killed by Darren Rawlings. The image of the mass-shooting played on CNN for weeks afterward, and Tanner was fast-becoming a kind of sought-after spectacle. He already had offers from Geraldo Rivera, Oprah, Larry King, and several other talk shows he couldn't even remember. The kicker was when an agent from L.A. called, seeking to "represent" his media interests. Tanner talked to no one.

It was discovered by certain journalists eager to dig deep into the new national tragedy that "Sabrina Sabrina" had actually been Joy "Joey" Cook, a young woman that had drifted up from Fayetteville, Kentucky with a boyfriend biker. *Newsweek* carried a special about the sordid aspects of her tough, white-trash upbringing: broken home, alcoholic stepfather, mentally-ill mother; acting up in high school, getting busted for theft, finally drifting into prostitution.

It was tragedy kitsch, and it must have made the paperback book market millions. Tanner found himself under siege for nearly two weeks. Damned reporters would catch him on the street, drive by, take photographs.

But he meant to be oblivious to the circus around him, and he largely was.

On the largest scale, the shooting on campus opened up a vein of social self-examination that amounted to pure masochism. Hearings were held in congress, gun lobbyists dug in for a fight, talking heads wondered where the youth was headed in our high-tech world of satanic rock, designer drugs, and violent, instantaneous gratification. Campus groups held one, many candlelight vigils. A few of the dead and injured had been

innocent bystanders, one or two were just walking down the opposite side of the street. Tanner had a picture, clipped from *Time*, of all their faces. Sabrina's face had been re-printed *ad nauseum*, more fabulously beautiful and well-known in death than she had been in her short, bitter existence.

According to the official police investigation, Sabrina had survived the gang rape that had been videotaped by one male present, the murdered Roger Doyle, an ex-con that still had connections to the Outlaw motorcycle gang. It had put her over the edge, psychologically. She was found by a state trooper wandering the highway two days later, in a daze.

She was taken to a hospital, but remained nearly-silent throughout. A month after, she could be found in a short-term psychiatric care facility, but signed herself out on a false pretence less than two weeks later. Her trail ran cold for a little while.

In that short amount of time she had managed to obtain the gun. She obviously had known something of the habits of some of her attackers, because she managed to track down Roger Doyle, and even guessed that he might be next door with his buddy. The complete timeline for the entire, bloody fiasco was still shaky.

As for Delcinos, it would never open it's doors again. Even after the crime scene was cleared, even after months went by, and the boarded-up windows seemed to hold back the echoing psychic agony of murder, it was still a place stuck in the middle of so much formerly-vibrant life that seemed to be able to suck the joy out of anything. People started talking about curses. The owners, Wiese Enterprises, tried for two years, unsuccessfully, to sell the building. No takers. Too many ghosts.

But eventually, the wounds of a community and an equally-stunned nation did begin to heal. After the funerals played, life started slipping back into an uneasy routine once more.

Tanner had, occasionally (well, really only once) ran into Milt and Patricia. Nether of them had been much more willing to talk, but Milt had grudgingly talked to the local papers, and

Patricia had taken the opportunity to publish a book of poetry that supported non-violence and gun control. Patricia had been crippled permanently by a stray bullet after the initial shooting had broken out, and it took all of Milt's strained strength to pull her back through the kitchen and outside, trailing blood behind her. She had suffered considerable shock. They were both in therapy.

They had married only three short months later.

Tanner had ran into him at the coffee bar across the street, where he had seen Milt sitting on a pale, spring morning, looking lonely and gray as ever. Tanner approached him slowly, and came up around the table out front where he was sitting.

"Milt...hi."

He didn't say anything for a moment, then said, "Hello, Tanner. Have a seat, if you will."

"Okay...let me just go inside and get me a coffee." Tanner went through the double glass doors, walked up to the counter, and tried to keep from looking directly into the eyes of the girl running the register.

"I'll just have a short coffee. That's it."

She knew damn well who he was. Everyone did, now. He handed her a dollar twenty-five, and she gave him a mug. He turned around, filled it to the brim, and walked carefully back outside to the patio.

He sat down opposite from Milt. Seebaum barely registered a perceptible expression.

"So...how is married life treating you?"

He picked up his mug, took a considered sip, and put it back down. He didn't look at Tanner directly, but seemed preoccupied by looking down University Ave. at the traffic.

"Not bad, my boy, all things considered. Patricia has just signed a deal with some New York publisher. The rights to the story. I guess we're going to settle down and get to work on that soon. They offered us...a pretty hefty advance. We're in the market for a new house. How about you?"

“The media has finally taken the hint. I’m not going to try and capitalize on this, Prof. I guess I’m too close to it all right now.”

Milt smiled. He pulled out a small packet of Velvet tobacco, some Zig Zags, and began to roll a very tiny cigarette. Tanner was not surprised to find him a smoker these days.

“You seem surprised. I find it helps to settle the nerves. Ah, I’m too old to worry at this point about my health.”

He lit up, and Tanner could smell a funny undercurrent to the tobacco. He realized it was a very fine, light mixture of regular rolling tobacco and marijuana. Medicinal. Tanner almost grinned.

“You know, Tanner, if you don’t feel, particularly, like you can take advantage of the opportunity...I mean, you are a *writer*, after all. Why not use this? Why not use it as a vehicle? It’s a once in a lifetime event. God chose all of us for this tragedy, to experience it together. I mean, it had to have some purpose. Maybe the purpose was for you, err, *all of us*, to write about it.”

Milt considered for a moment.

“Do you know a young guy named Lance, err...*something or other*. He survived that night, but his girlfriend with him didn’t. She was actually on the faculty. Architecture department, or something. Anyway, his band *Saturn in Retrograde* have just been signed to Atlantic. He’s doing a double-album rock opera based on the massacre. *Spin* is already calling him the new Kurt Cobain. Voice of a lost generation. Some sort of media puff job. Oh, he’ll make millions, Tanner.”

Tanner’s mouth dropped open. It was the last absurdity in what amounted to an already bloody fiasco.

“You’re kidding. You’re not kidding. Well, let him. Fucking Lance always was looking for his big break. I’ll have to stop and buy the magazine.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“You know Tanner, if I were you, maybe I would just go ahead and get away for awhile. If I was a young man. Maybe that’s why you can’t write right now. You need to see the world. Get out

from under your present notoriety. It doesn't really suit you, does it my boy?"

Tanner shook his head. Cars and trucks roared by. The clouds started gathering, obscuring the trickling light. People moved casually up and down the sidewalk. But the streets seemed empty today, lifeless. The whole campus area was starting to feel like a prison.

Milt made some more small talk, finished his coffee, picked up a battered old attaché, and told Tanner to take care. He walked away, a tall, gaunt shadow trailing his lean, academic form. His suit was still the same drab gray as always. He looked like the ghost of William S. Burroughs.

Tanner had walked around until dusk, and had settled on going back to his little sleeping room. He had climbed the lonely stairs wearily, unlocked the door, not bothering to turn on the lights, and had plopped down to lay on the bed in silence. That night, he went out to walk again in the darkness, meeting no one.

Loneliness could crush you under its boot. It took no prisoners. Even when you sat in a crowded room, with eyes crawling over you, you were still, fundamentally, alone. He considered suicide.

No. No, that was not quite right. He had already made the history books, after a fashion. His name would forever be associated with the "U.C.U Campus Killings". If he killed himself now, he would hand himself over to more publicity. He would be the eighth victim of Kyle and Darren. He couldn't have that.

Instead, he would disappear. Quietly. Assumed name, just wander. Like Kerouac. On the road, and out of sight.

Then, when it was time, he would write his book.

Epilog

He had started out just thumbing rides, knowing damn well that it was dangerous. But what did he care now? Everything had stopped making sense a long time ago.

He had hitched with a succession of different people. Some pleasant, some indifferent, some downright scary.

One man, a very dirty-looking old man that doubled as a sort of itinerant, spiritualist minister, took considerable pains explaining the coming of the Antichrist, and the Mark of the Beast.

But the man had been okay. He had even lent him a Bible and a few dollars before dropping him off at a truck stop in the middle of nowhere.

“Go on in there and get yourself something to eat, boy. And may Jesus see you on your way. It was a pleasure to meet you. I’ll be praying for you. If you ever get down to Evansville, you stop by. Me and the missus sometime have company, and I know she won’t mind.”

Tanner had no idea what to say.

“Thank you,” he said tiredly.

He didn’t know where he was going to end up tonight, let alone anytime in the distant future. It seemed like he was walking on a wing and a prayer.

The old man started up his car, turned for a minute, waved, and then took off. He didn’t even stop to refuel.

That had been strange. Tanner felt a creeping, foreboding sense wash over him. He pivoted, and walked into the truck stop.

It was wall-to-wall rednecks, but the greasy, nourishing food smelled so delicious Tanner could hardly claim to care. It smelled like coffee and cigarettes, hamburgers and plates of french fries. He walked up to the counter, placed his knapsack on the floor and slumped up onto a stool. A waitress walked out of the kitchen, a very pretty girl with short, bobbed hair and not a few freckles. Tall girl, too.

“Hey honey, what can I get you?”

She had a smile as wide as a canyon. Tanner could feel his heart melt a little.

He had fifty dollars.

“I’ll have a hamburger with everything, a side of fries, a

coke, and a piece of pie.”

“Gotcha. Want some coffee too?”

He paused.

“Sure.”

He yawned. He looked like a mile of rough road.

“Hey, sounds like you didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“No. I’m hoofing it, too. So it makes it hard.”

He yawned again.

“Really...where ya headed to?”

He looked at her blankly for a moment, unsure of how to respond.

“Evansville.”

“Oh. Okay.” She sounded unconvinced, scratched onto her little pad, and walked away to yell at the cook. She got his drinks.

He leaned, sleepily, on one arm. He felt completely disoriented, completely unreal. He had disconnected himself from the matrix of his being. He had voluntarily taken flight. Where was he? Where was he to go from here?

The aimlessness of it all was both exciting and terrifying.

He let his eyes scan the bar, slowly, lowly, taking in the rolling guts, the plaid shirts, the John Deere caps. He pulled a cigarette from his crumpled pack and lit it, absentmindedly.

The waitress put an ashtray in front of him. It was 3.30 p.m. It was Thursday.

He wondered if he would die soon. He could, if he saw fit, just throw himself in front of one of the trucks that roared down the highway. Or just hole up in some corner of the woods, like an old Indian, and wait for death to creep up slowly.

He knew full well there might, in fact, be some sort of psychopath out there with his name written all over a long sleek buck knife. It happened. He knew the risks before he set out. He might hitch a ride and end up a prisoner of some demented pervert. He shivered. The temperature at Haps Truck Stop suddenly seemed to have dropped ten degrees. He scanned the dining room again. Where was the psychopath? It could be

anyone. Maybe the next ride he hitched wouldn't be some friendly old preacher. Maybe it would be a Dennis Nilsen, or a John Gacy.

It happened. He knew from experience.

He devoured the food as soon as it was set in front of him, taking it in like it was the last thing standing between him and sudden, instantaneous death.

"Boy, somebody sure was hungry."

The pretty waitress leaned over the counter. Tanner eyed her suspiciously.

"First time today you've had a bite, isn't it hon?"

She smiled at him again.

"Yeah. I didn't get a chance to eat before I left town."

"Huh? Well, how about that. Tell ya what, you got a place to stay tonight?"

His mouth dropped open suddenly. He closed it just as quickly, realizing that it was still full of half-chewed food.

"Uh, no, as a matter of fact. In fact, I guess you could say I'm just sort of drifting. Seeing the country."

She whistled, low. He suddenly saw that she was somewhat older than what he first had thought. Perhaps mid-thirties. But it was hard for him to tell. However old she was, she had kept up very well.

"Well, you look like you could use a good friend. You want a place to stay tonight, um, my place is always open. I mean, are you cool?"

She put the tip of her thumb and forefinger to her lips, and sucked in. The universal sign for pot smoking.

He considered.

"Yeah. I'm cool. I actually just graduated from university. So, I'm not a bum or anything, you know. I just..."

"You just needed to get away for awhile, didn't you, hon? Well, tell you what," she turned and looked at the clock, "I get off in ten minutes. Why don't you just come on over and we can, you know." And she put her fingers to her lips more gingerly this time.

"Yeah. Okay."

He felt tense all over. The adventure was starting already.

“So tell me about yourself, boy. Say you look familiar, somehow.”

Tanner evaded her comment. If she realized who he was later, he decided that would be okay. Until then

“Oh, there’s not much to say, really. I come from Union. I just got my English degree from a college...up north. I, uh, I just had a break-up with a girl. I got kind a stressed about it.”

She looked understanding. “Oh, I see. So you just kind of wanted to get away. And you don’t really, have no place to go, huh?”

“Yeah, I have to confess, that’s it.”

They were headed down State Road 18, but she turned off down a country road, drove over a covered bridge of immense age, and headed for a little woods at the edge of a lake. The sun was just starting to dip behind the horizon. Beautiful.

She pulled over onto a little dirt strip amidst a strand of trees and bushes, and pulled out a small clay marijuana pipe.

“Got any kids?”

“No. How about you? You got any?”

She pulled a little baggie of weed from her purse, and a small clay pipe. She packed it with the tip of her finger, produced a lighter, and raised the tip to her lips, sucking the smoke in. She turned to him, nodded, and held up two fingers in the v sign. She had two kids.

“One eighteen, and one sixteen. And both of them with their daddy this week.”

She blew out the pot smoke, her voice raspy. She coughed, a little spastic heck heck sound, and passed him the pipe. He didn’t even like to smoke pot, but he took it and the lighter and took a hit anyway.

He coughed. He didn’t want anymore.

She took a few more hits, looked at the end, decided that she would try once more, and then decided it was “cashed”.

She felt good. They both sat there in utter silence for a moment, watching the sun fade behind the water. The view was exquisite and lovely.

“So, Tom.”

“Yeah...”

He suddenly realized he couldn’t remember her name.

“Pam. Pamela Jane. You can call me P.J. All my friends call me P.J.”

“Okay, P.J. I like that. It’s cute.”

He suddenly found that his heart was hammering in his chest.

“Um, don’t take this the wrong way but, *you do like girls, don’t you?*”

“If you mean, am I gay? No. Not at all.”

She smiled, apologetic. And then she started laughing. He could tell by the two red pin points of her eyes that the weed was taking effect.

“I’m sorry baby, but I had to ask! I mean, you strike me as being kinda *different* from the guys that usually come into the truck stop. And you said you went to college.”

“No, I’m as straight as they come P.J. Believe me. I almost lost my life over a girl, once.”

“Oh, really. Wow. What happened?”

Pause.

“She was killed... It’s a long story.”

“Oh I am so sorry sugar, well, that’s okay if you don’t want to tell me.”

They sat in silence for a few more moments. She produced some cigarettes, and they each lit up.

Smoke. Murmur. Tension.

“It’s really beautiful out here this evening.”

“Yeah, I come out here sometimes after work and smoke up. Just to watch the sunset over the water. You know, I think I saw one of the, what ya call them?” She started to shake her hand, grasping for the expression, “*UFOs*---that’s it---I saw one of them

out here one time. I was sitting here, and this great big thing just appears, and starts hovering over the water. It had all these lights on it. It just stopped there, in the air. Scared the hell out of me. You believe in UFOs, Tom?"

He shook his head no. He was a firm believer, actually.

"I mean, I believe that there could be something, out there. Has to be. The universe is endless."

"You know, I think I heard someone on the *Discovery Channel* say that once. You like TV? What's your favorite show?"

"*Northern Exposure*."

She looked at him quizzically.

"Northern Exposure...I don't think I've ever seen that one. Oh, wait a minute. Was that that show from way back in the nineties where they're all, like, living in Alaska, and everybody's all kooky and shit?"

"Yep. That's my favorite show. They use to rerun it on A&E, but they stopped. I haven't seen it in years. My favorite character was Ed Chigliak. He was this native Alaskan kid that was in training to be a *shaman*."

She looked at him, blankly.

"A what?"

"A shaman is like an Indian priest. A healer. The shaman goes down to the spirit world if the tribe has a problem. He asks the assistance of the Great White Spirit on behalf of his tribe."

Pause.

"Oh, well. I didn't really watch that show that much."

Silence.

"You, uh, do live alone, don't you?"

"No. Oh, I mean, I live with my brother right now, I mean. But he drives a truck. He won't be back for awhile. I'm not married. Separated."

It sounded like lies. But he didn't question her. And, as they lay out on an old blanket amidst the long grass, making love underneath the stars, not even a legion of mosquitoes managed to dampen his ardor any.

Later, they went back to her house, and she fixed him a *Hungry Man* TV Dinner.

Her house was rather old, cluttered. Unkempt. There were TV dinner trays lying on the kitchen counter with cigarettes stubbed in them. There were cheap pictures bought at thrift stores. There was the regulation tattered couch. Of course, there were no books.

But he didn't care. Just as long as the "brother" didn't show up unexpectedly.

The glare from the TV threw blue light onto the rumpled bed. It was an old re-run of *Sanford and Son*.

"Hello Elizabeth, I'm coming to join you honey!"

P.J. did her Red Foxx impersonation. It made him giggle. They had drank some beer, and smoked some more grass, and made love again. She was a peach, he decided, even if she was a rather intellectually-dull peach. And besides, he wasn't going to curse his luck at this point. His first official day as a vagrant, and he was laying in a nice soft bed with a full stomach, with an attractive older woman.

Yep. Sometimes God even smiled on him.

He slipped out the next morning, before she even awoke. At first, he had planned to stay a few days, play it by ear. See how things went. But, as he rose before dawn, with a nasty headache, he had wandered out onto the porch to see the sun come up. For some strange reason, he had taken the bible that the preacher that had given him a lift gave to him. He hadn't even opened it yet.

On the inside cover, written in large, sloppy handwriting, it gave the address of the Reverend Fred Keane, as well as a phone number, and, below that, the words, *it is well, it is well, with my soul*.

The birds had begun to chirp, and the sky took on the light blue gaze that heralded the dawn of a new day. Those words began to wring in his awakening mind.

The "house" was, in actuality, a trailer, situated in a dismal little trailer court right off the highway.

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

From where he stood, peaking just over the horizon, he could see the magnificent glory of the celestial bringer of light and warmth begin its journey upward once more, never-ceasing to be the reason that life could continue to crawl, to thrive, to breathe.

He inhaled. Even in a dismal little trailer park, the fresh air of the morning smelled delicious. It made him want to flee. It made him want to run. It made him dream again, that sunrise.

It is well.

With my soul.

The words seemed to take on huge, mantra-like significance in his mind. He was having a moment of supreme illumination. He went inside, put on his jeans and shirt, picked up his knap sack, and turned, and looked at the long sleek legs and the beautiful breasts of the sleeping figure on the rumpled bed.

He crept into the kitchen, obtained, out of the mess in the drawers, a pen, and scratched out a note. He thanked her for the TV dinner, and for keeping him for the night. He also left the forwarding address and the phone number of Reverend Keane. If she wanted to, she could catch up with him. But, he knew if he stayed, he would outlive his welcome, again.

He walked out of the disordered, dirty trailer, closed the door softly, stepped out into the morning, and walked up to the road. Not many cars at 5: 30 in the morning. Oh well, his thumb would help him out later. He started walking.

Tanner Benjamin bumped and bounced in the back of the rickety old truck, not exactly sure where he was going, but sure of which way he was headed. Around him, America spread her amber legs in exaltation, and the world seemed like it might go on surviving forever.

Bounce. Bump. Vroom!

In the cab up front, a very large farm boy named Dub sped

down the highway with every intention of taking Tanner as far as the open road would go. Or until he got to the next town. Whichever came first.

War still raged in Iraq. The daily news still gave off it's reports of increased terrorist alerts, and the development of the human species as a paranoid, confined creature, a victim of it's own will to power, continued unabated. Evil still made sure that microchips were implanted under human skin, fanatics in far-off desert countries still plotted and schemed, and drugs were still injected in the waiting veins of those people unlucky enough to find themselves caught on the end of a physiological teat, choking out their last bits of life in the gray, swirling dawns of so many cities that had replaced cloud cover with smog.

In institutions, they still indoctrinated. In churches, they still prayed.

In supermarkets, they still shopped. On battlefields they still killed. *It is well*, he thought, *with my soul*.

The roads blew by. The tall grasses waved in the cool, sweeping wind. Behind him, he was leaving an expanse of country that had reared generations of noble, ragged young men to rise up, claim the torch of their forebears, and carry on.

Tonight, alone for the first time in an absolute, complete way, Tanner Benjamin would sleep under an expanse of stars that never ended. He knew that somewhere out there was the God force that had breathed the entire epic of humanity into motion. Did that God still care?

It is well, he thought.

Now he was going to live. Now he was free, really, for the first time in years. Free to experience life in an entirely new way. Free to sleep out under the stars and planets. Free to visit the temple of himself in his own time.

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Would he ever find the answer he was looking for? Was life, truly, as brutal, as random and senseless and terrifying as what he had learned in the past month of living? After seeing the death,

and brutality, and carnage he had seen, how did one cope? How did one manage to go on, surrounded by life, with a knowledge of such horror?

He didn't know. Some things still didn't make much sense. It would take a lot of time to figure things out.

He smiled. Inwardly. He smiled at the great expanse of the world and the opportunities for living that he knew he still had. Time. He had survived. He had grown. He knew what life was now.

He had time.

It is well, it is well, with my soul...

The old Baptist hymn kept flitting in his mind, as he sat there in the back of the truck, knowing no pain, knowing no more of anything else except the limitless glee of eternal hope.

It was well, you see. All of it.

Tanner Benjamin had found his soul.

And all that cal.

Afterword

The nineties were a shocking, difficult era to grow up in. It went in with the horror of the L.A. riots, went out with the mass-murder at Columbine, and had sandwiched between it such wondrous historical moments as the first Gulf War, the massacre of the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, and the terrorist attack that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, costing the life of hundreds of innocent people.

It was the decade when on-line became a reality, paranoia made television shows like the *X-Files* extremely successful, and the N.R.A. did all they could to ensure that everyone would continue to have the right to bear arms, paranoid or otherwise.

The national media circus centered around alternate spectacles of the self-inflicted shotgun death of *Nirvana* lead-

singer Kurt Cobain, the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman, the mass-suicide of the UFO-oriented religious group Heaven's Gate, the vileness of performance artist *cum* tabloid Satanist Marilyn Manson (real name Brian Warner), and the cultural raspberry of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. All things considered, Slick Willy and his chubby mistress may have been one of the funniest side-shows going that whole long decade.

The strange eddies and currents also swept in the corpulent, yelling-from-the-ballpark-bleachers political conservative Rush, the talk-show sleaze of Jerry Springer, Howard Stern (and variations between Jerry Springer and Howard Stern), the legitimization of pornography, and macabre obsession with such fine upstanding citizens as cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer, castrator Lorena Bobbitt, and "Unabomber" Theodore Kaczynski.

Gang life became dramatized and glorified with "gangster rap", heavy metal musicians now openly espoused murder, necrophilia, and suicide, drive-by shootings became commonplace even in small cities, and metal detectors went up in the high schools.

As I stated, it was a highly-charged decade, for a lot of reasons.

Sabrina, *Sabrina* is a satire of certain cultural trends. I hope, someday, it may seem as far-fetched as science fiction, but, listening to the latest newscasts about high-level terrorist alerts, political corruption in high places, environmental disaster, cultural breakdown, religious apostasy, church scandals involving hundreds of pedophile priests, and the backlash against free speech in one, many forms, I fear it will not be so.

Milestones in my outlook on society as a young man included the acquittal of a celebrity that was obviously guilty of murder, seeing my father go off to "liberate" Kuwait and knowing there was a chance he may never come back (he did, thankfully), realizing that no matter how hard I busted my ass working for minimum wage I was never going to get ahead financially, coming

to the conclusion that college was simply another permutation of high school, and watching cameras crawl through the hallways of Rancho Santa Fe, broadcasting silent bodies in black Nike running shoes.

I remember that particular image well. I remember thinking that those people were crazy. They had all had so much faith that the UFO was coming, that they had decided to take the final plunge into death, no holds barred.

But now I wonder:

How crazy were they?

Is it crazy to want to escape such a world?

The last great milestone, the terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001, actually put the final feather in my misanthropic cap. It was the last brushstroke, so to speak. I knew then that nothing made sense anymore, and that whatever I had been led to believe for so many years about life was nothing more than a sad illusion. The world could end. Life could be shattered, violently, from out of the blue. And nothing was what it seemed, anymore.

That day will live in infamy, in my mind. But I can't let myself dwell on the image of the collapsing towers, or I will collapse. Because the world is not our friend. And it could be.

We have stepped out onto the surface of the Moon, put rovers on Mars, cured diseases thought unconquerable, and have secured the resources of a vast, living, electronic brain called the World Wide Web, which makes communication instantaneous for everyone. This should be the Utopian Era: a world of scientific achievement and technological mastery that promises to usher in the Reign of Prosperity. Instead, it's raining blood around the world.

R. Buckminster Fuller, the brilliant scientist and polymath, declared that with the present design technologies we should be able to secure abundance and plenty for all. End of story. And I believe him.

Bucky died in 1983. It's a damn good thing he didn't live to see the turn of the century.

It would have killed him.